

Fully loaded anniversary edition!

ALEX RIDER



STORMBREAKER



Special bonus
material inside!

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

#1 New York Times bestselling author

Stormbreaker

Alex Rider [1]

Anthony Horowitz

Putnam Publishing Group (2011)

From Publishers Weekly

Readers will cheer for Alex Rider, the 14-year-old hero of British author Horowitz's spy thriller (the first in a projected series). When his guardian and uncle, Ian, is mysteriously killed, Alex discovers that his uncle was not the bank vice-president he purported to be, but rather a spy for the British government. Now the government wants Alex to take over his uncle's mission: investigating Sayle Enterprises, the makers of a revolutionary computer called Stormbreaker. The company's head plans to donate one to every secondary school in England, but his dealings with unfriendly countries and Ian Rider's murder have brought him under suspicion. Posing as a teenage computer whiz who's won a Stormbreaker promotional contest, Alex enters the factory and immediately finds clues from his uncle. Satirical names abound (e.g., Mr. Grin, Mr. Sayle's brutish butler, is so named for the scars he received from a circus knife-throwing act gone wrong) and the hard-boiled language is equally outrageous ("It was a soft gray night with a half-moon forming a perfect D in the sky. D for what, Alex wondered. Danger? Discovery? Or disaster?"). These exaggerations only add to the fun, as do the creative gadgets that Alex uses, including a metal-munching cream described as "Zit-Clean. For Healthier Skin." The ultimate mystery may be a bit of a letdown, but that won't stop readers from racing through Alex's adventures, from a high-speed bike chase to a death-defying dance with a Portuguese man-of-war. The audience will stay tuned for his next assignment, *Point Blanc*, due out spring 2002. Ages 10-up.

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From School Library Journal

Gr 5-9-Alex Rider's world is turned upside down when he discovers that his uncle and guardian has been murdered. The 14-year-old makes one discovery after another until he is sucked into his uncle's undercover world. The Special Operations Division of M16, his uncle's real employer, blackmails the teen into serving England. After two short weeks of training, Alex is equipped with several special toys like a Game Boy with unique cartridges that allow it to scan, fax, and emit smoke bombs. Alex's mission is to complete his uncle's last assignment, to discover the secret that Herod Sayle is hiding behind his generous donation of one of his supercomputers to every school in the country. When Alex enters Sayle's compound in Port Tallon, he discovers a strange world of secrets and villains including Mr. Grin, an ex-circus knife catcher, and Yassen Gregorovich, professional hit man. The novel provides bang after bang as Alex experiences and survives unbelievably dangerous episodes and eventually crashes through the roof of the Science Museum to save the day. Alex is a strong, smart hero. If readers consider luck the ruling factor in his universe, they will love this James Bond-style adventure. With short cliff-hanger chapters and its breathless pace, it is an excellent

choice for reluctant readers. Warning: Suspend reality.

Lynn Bryant, formerly at Navarre High School, FL

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SUMMARY:

They told him his uncle died in a car accident. But fourteen-year-old Alex knows that's a lie, and the bullet holes in his uncle's windshield confirm his suspicions. But nothing could prepare him for the news that the uncle he always thought he knew was really a spy for MI6-Britain's top secret intelligence agency. Recruited to find his uncle's killers and complete his final mission, Alex suddenly finds himself caught in a deadly game of cat and mouse. "What if James Bond had started spying as a teenager? Non-stop action keeps the intrigue boiling." (Kirkus Reviews)

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FUNERAL VOICES

WHEN THE DOORBELL rings at three in the morning, it's never good news.

Alex Rider was woken by the first chime. His eyes flickered open, but for a moment he stayed completely still in his bed, lying on his back with his head resting on the pillow. He heard a bedroom door open and a creak of wood as somebody went downstairs. The bell rang a second time, and he looked at the alarm clock glowing beside him. There was a rattle as someone slid the security chain off the front door.

He rolled out of bed and walked over to the open window, his bare feet pressing down the carpet pile. The moonlight spilled onto his chest and shoulders. Alex was fourteen, already well built, with the body of an athlete. His hair, cut short apart from two thick strands hanging over his forehead, was fair. His eyes were brown and serious. For a moment he stood silently, half hidden in the shadow, looking out. There was a police car parked outside. From his second-floor window Alex could see the black ID number on the roof and the caps of the two men who were standing in front of the door. The porch light went on and, at the same time, the door opened.

“Mrs. Rider?”

“No. I'm the housekeeper. What is it? What's happened?”

“This is the home of Mr. Ian Rider?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder if we could come in...”

And Alex already knew. He knew from the way the police stood there, awkward and unhappy. But he also knew from the tone of their voices. Funeral voices ... that was how he would describe them later. The sort of voices people use when they come to tell you that someone close to you has died.

He went to his door and opened it. He could hear the two policemen talking down in the hall, but only some of the words reached him.

“... a car accident ... called the ambulance ... intensive care ... nothing anyone could do ... so sorry.”

It was only hours later, sitting in the kitchen, watching as the gray light of morning bled slowly through the West London streets, that Alex could try to make sense of what had happened. His uncle—Ian Rider—was dead. Driving home, his car had been hit by a truck at Old Street roundabout and he had been killed almost instantly. He hadn't been wearing a seat belt, the police said. Otherwise, he might have had a chance.

Alex thought of the man who had been his only relation for as long as he could remember. He had never known his own parents. They had both died in another accident, this one a plane crash, a few weeks after he had been born. He had been brought up by his father's brother (never “uncle”—Ian Rider had hated that word) and had spent fourteen years in the same terraced house in Chelsea, London, between the King's Road and the river. The two of them had always been close. Alex

remembered the vacations they'd taken together, the many sports they'd played, the movies they'd seen. They hadn't just been relations, they'd been friends. It was almost impossible to imagine that he would never again see the man, hear his laughter, or twist his arm to get help with his science homework.

Alex sighed, fighting against the sense of grief that was suddenly overwhelming. But what saddened him the most was the realization—too late now—that despite everything, he had hardly known his uncle at all.

He was a banker. People said Alex looked a little like him. Ian Rider was always traveling. A quiet, private man who liked good wine, classical music, and books. Who didn't seem to have any girlfriends ... in fact, he didn't have any friends at all. He had kept himself fit, had never smoked, and had dressed expensively.

But that wasn't enough. It wasn't a picture of a life. It was only a thumbnail sketch.

"Are you all right, Alex?" A young woman had come into the room. She was in her late twenties with a sprawl of red hair and a round, boyish face. Jack Starbright was American. She had come to London as a student seven years ago, rented a room in the house in return for light housework and baby-sitting duties and had stayed on to become housekeeper and one of Alex's closest companions. Sometimes he wondered what the Jack was short for. Jackie? Jacqueline? Neither of them suited her and although he had once asked, she had never said.

Alex nodded. "What do you think will happen?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"To the house. To me. To you."

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I guess Ian would have made a will," she said. "He'll have left instructions."

"Maybe we should look in his office."

"Yeah. But not today, Alex. Let's take it one step at a time."

Ian's office was a room running the full length of the house, high up on the top—It was the only room that was always locked—Alex had only been in there three or four times, and never on his own. When he was younger, he had fantasized that there might be something strange up there ... a time machine or a UFO.

But it was merely an office with a desk, a couple of filing cabinets, shelves full of papers and books. Bank stuff—that's what Ian said. Even so, Alex wanted to go up there now.

"The police said he wasn't wearing his seat belt." Alex turned to look at Jack.

She nodded. "Yeah. That's what they said."

"Doesn't that seem strange to you? You know how careful he was. He always wore his seat belt. He wouldn't even drive me around the corner without making me put mine on."

Jack thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, it is strange," she said. "But that must have been the way it was. Why would the police have lied?"

The day dragged on. Alex hadn't gone to school even though, secretly, he wanted to. He would have

preferred to escape back into normal life, the clang of the bell, the crowds of familiar faces, instead of sitting here, trapped inside the house. But he had to be there for the visitors who came throughout the morning and the rest of the afternoon.

There were five of them. A lawyer who knew nothing about any will but seemed to have been charged with organizing the funeral. A funeral director who had been recommended by the lawyer. A vicar—tall, elderly—who seemed disappointed that Alex refused to cry. A neighbor from across the road—how did she even know that anyone had died? And finally a man from the bank.

“All of us at the Royal and General are deeply shocked,” he said. He looked about thirty, wearing a polyester suit with a Marks & Spencer tie. He had the sort of face you forget even while you’re looking at it and had introduced himself as Crawley, from personnel. “But if there’s anything we can do…”

“What will happen?” Alex asked for the second time that day.

“You don’t have to worry,” Crawley said. “The bank will take care of everything. That’s my job. You leave everything to me.”

The day passed. Alex killed a couple of hours knocking a few balls around on his uncle’s snooker table and then felt vaguely guilty when Jack caught him at it. But what else was he to do? Later on she took him to a Burger King. He was glad to get out of the house, but the two of them barely spoke. Alex assumed Jack would have to go back to America. She certainly couldn’t stay in London forever. So who would look after him? At fourteen, he was still too young to look after himself. His whole future looked so uncertain that he preferred not to talk about it. He preferred not to talk at all.

And then the day of the funeral arrived and Alex found himself dressed in a dark jacket and cords, preparing to leave in a black car that had come from nowhere surrounded by people he had never met. Ian Rider was buried in Brompton Cemetery on the Fulham Road, just in the shadow of the Chelsea soccer field, and Alex knew where he would have preferred to be on that warm Wednesday afternoon. About thirty people had turned up, but he hardly recognized any of them. A grave had been dug close to the lane that ran the length of the cemetery, and as the service began, a black Rolls-Royce drew up, the back door opened, and a man got out. Alex watched him as he walked forward and stopped. Alex shivered. There was something about the new arrival that made his skin crawl.

And yet the man was ordinary to look at. Gray suit, gray hair, gray lips, and gray eyes. His face was expressionless, the eyes behind the square, gunmetal spectacles, completely empty. Perhaps that was what had disturbed Alex. Whoever this man was, he seemed to have less life than anyone in the cemetery. Above or below ground.

Someone tapped Alex on the shoulder and he turned around to see Mr. Crawley leaning over him. “That’s Mr. Blunt,” the personnel manager whispered. “He’s the chairman of the bank.”

Alex’s eyes traveled past Blunt and over to the Rolls-Royce. Two more men had come with him, one of them driving. They were wearing identical suits and, although it wasn’t a particularly bright day, sunglasses. Both of them were watching the funeral with the same grim faces. Alex looked from them to Blunt and then to the other people who had come to the cemetery. Had they really known Ian Rider? Why had he never met any of them before? And why did he find it so difficult to believe that they really worked for a bank?

“He is a good man, a patriotic man. He will be missed.”

The vicar had finished his graveside address. His choice of words struck Alex as odd. Patriotic? That meant he loved his country. But as far as Alex knew, Ian Rider had barely spent any time in it. Certainly he had never been one for waving the Union Jack. He looked around, hoping to find Jack, but saw instead that Blunt was making his way toward him, stepping carefully around the grave.

“You must be Alex.” The chairman was only a little taller than him. Up close, his skin was strangely unreal.

It could have been made of plastic. “My name is Alan Blunt,” he said. “Your uncle often spoke about you.”

“That’s funny,” Alex said. “He never mentioned YOU.”

The gray lips twitched briefly. “We’ll miss him. He was a good man.”

“What was he good at?” Alex asked. “He never talked about his work.”

Suddenly Crawley was there. “Your uncle was overseas finance manager, Alex,” he said. “He was responsible for our foreign branches. You must have known that.”

“I know he traveled a lot,” Alex said. “And I know he was very careful. About things like seat belts.”

“Well, sadly, he wasn’t careful enough.” Blunt’s eyes, magnified by the thick lenses of his spectacles, lasered into his own, and for a moment, Alex felt himself pinned down, like an insect under a microscope. “I hope we’ll meet again,” Blunt went on. He tapped the side of his face with a single gray finger. “Yes ...” Then he turned and went back to his car.

That was when it happened. As Blunt was getting into the Rolls-Royce, the driver leaned down to open the back door and his jacket fell open, revealing a stark white shirt underneath. There was a black shape lying against it and that was what caught Alex’s eye. The man was wearing a leather holster with an automatic pistol strapped inside. Realizing what had happened, the driver quickly straightened up and pulled the jacket across. Blunt had seen it too. He turned back and looked again at Alex. Something very close to an emotion slithered over his face. Then he got into the car, the door closed, and he was gone.

A gun at a funeral, Alex thought. Why? Why should bank managers carry guns?

“Let’s get out of here.” Suddenly Jack was at his side. “Cemeteries give me the creeps.”

“Yes. And quite a few creeps have turned up,” Alex muttered.

They slipped away quietly and went home. The car that had taken them to the funeral was still waiting, but they preferred the open air. The walk took them fifteen minutes and as they turned the corner onto their street, Alex noticed a moving van parked in front of the house, the words STRYKER & SON painted on its side.

“What’s that doing ...?” he began.

At the same moment, the van shot off, the wheels skidding over the surface of the road.

Alex said nothing as Jack unlocked the door and let them in, but while she went into the kitchen to make some tea, he quickly looked around the house. A letter that had been on the hall table now lay on the carpet. A door that had been half open was now closed. Tiny details, but Alex’s eyes missed nothing.

Somebody had been in the house. He was almost sure of it.

But he wasn't certain until he got to the top floor. The door to the office, which had always, always been locked, was now unlocked. Alex opened it and went in. The room was empty. Ian Rider had gone and so had everything else. The desk drawers, the closets, the shelves ... anything connected to the dead man's work had been taken. Whatever the truth was about his uncle's past, someone had just wiped it out.

HEAVEN FOR CARS

WITH HAMMERSMITH BRIDGE just ahead of him, Alex left the river and swung his bike through the lights and down the hill toward Brookland School. The bike was a Condor Junior Roadracer, custom built for him on his twelfth birthday. It was a teenager's bike, with a cut down Reynolds 531 frame, but the wheels were fullsize so he could ride at speed with hardly any rolling resistance. He spun past a delivery van and passed through the school gates. He would be sorry when he grew out of the bike. For two years now it had almost been part of him.

He double locked it in the shed and went into the yard. Brookland was a modern school, all redbrick and, to Alex's eye, rather ugly. He could have gone to any of the exclusive private schools around Chelsea, but Ian Rider had decided to send him here. He had said it would be more of a challenge.

The first period of the day was algebra. When Alex came into the classroom, the teacher, Mr. Donovan, was already chalking up a complicated equation on the board. It was hot in the room, the sun streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, put in by architects who should have known better. As Alex took his place near the back, he wondered how he was going to get through the lesson. How could he possibly think about algebra when there were so many other questions churning through his mind?

The gun at the funeral. The way Blunt had looked at him. The van with STRYKER & SON written on the side. The empty office. And the biggest mystery of all, the one detail that refused to go away. The seat belt.

Ian Rider hadn't been wearing a seat belt.

But of course he had. Ian Rider had never been one to give lectures. He had always said Alex should make up his own mind about things. But he'd had this thing about seat belts. The more Alex thought about it, the less he believed it. A collision in the middle of the city. Suddenly he wished he could see the car. At least the wreckage would tell him that the accident had really happened, that Ian Rider had really died that way.

"Alex?"

Alex looked up and realized that everyone was staring at him. Mr. Donovan had just asked him something.

He quickly scanned the blackboard, taking in the figures. "Yes, Sir," he said. "X equals seven and Y is fifteen."

The math teacher sighed. "Yes, Alex. You're absolutely right. But actually I was just asking you to open the window..."

Somehow he managed to get through the rest of the day, but by the time the final bell rang, his mind was made up. While everyone else streamed out, he made his way to the secretary's office and borrowed a copy of the Yellow Pages.

"What are you looking for?" the secretary asked. Miss Bedfordshire had always had a soft spot for Alex.

“Auto junkyards...” Alex flicked through the pages. “If a car got smashed up near Old Street, they’d take it somewhere near, wouldn’t they?”

“I suppose so.”

“Here...” Alex had found the yards listed under “Auto Wreckers.” But there were dozens of them fighting for attention over four pages.

“Is this for a school project?” the secretary asked. She knew Alex had lost a relative, but not how.

“Sort of...” Alex was reading the addresses, but they told him nothing.

“This one’s quite near Old Street.” Miss Bedfordshire pointed at the corner of the page.

“Wait!” Alex tugged the book toward him and looked at the entry underneath the one the secretary had chosen:

J. B. STRYKER. AUTO WRECKERS

Heaven for Cars

CALL US TODAY

“That’s in Vauxhall,” Miss Bedfordshire said. “Not too far from here.”

“I know.” But Alex had recognized the name. J. B. Stryker. He thought back to the van he had seen outside his house on the day of the funeral. Stryker & Son. Of course it might just be a coincidence, but it was still somewhere to start. He closed the book. “I’ll see you, Miss Bedfordshire.”

“Be careful.” The secretary watched Alex leave, wondering why she had said that. Maybe it was his eyes.

Dark and serious, there was something dangerous there. Then the telephone rang and she forgot him as she went back to work.

J. B. Stryker’s was a square of wasteland behind the railway tracks running out of Waterloo Station. The area was enclosed by a high brick wall topped with broken glass and razor wire. Two wooden gates hung open, and from the other side of the road, Alex could see a shed with a security window and beyond it the tottering piles of dead and broken cars. Everything of any value had been stripped away and only the rusting carcasses remained, heaped one on top of the other, waiting to be fed into the crusher.

There was a guard sitting in the shed, reading a newspaper. In the distance a bulldozer coughed into life, then roared down on a battered Ford Taurus, its metal claw smashing through the window to scoop up the vehicle and carry it away. A telephone rang somewhere in the shed and the guard turned around to answer it. That was enough for Alex. Holding his bike and wheeling it along beside him, he sprinted through the gates.

He found himself surrounded by dirt and debris. The smell of diesel was thick in the air and the roar of the engines was deafening. Alex watched as a crane swooped down on one of the cars, seized it in a metallic grip, and dropped it into a crusher. For a moment the car rested on a pair of shelves. Then the shelves lifted up, toppling the car over and down into a trough. The operator—sitting in a glass cabin at one end of the crusher pressed a button and there was a great belch of black smoke. The shelves closed in on the car like a monster insect folding in its wings. There was a grinding sound as

the car was crushed until it was no bigger than a rolled-up carpet. Then the operator threw a gear and the car was squeezed out, metallic toothpaste being chopped up by a hidden blade. The slices tumbled to the ground.

Leaving his bike propped against the wall, Alex ran farther into the yard, crouching down behind the wrecks. With the din from the machines, there was no chance that anyone would hear him, but he was still afraid of being seen. He stopped to catch his breath, drawing a grimy hand across his face. His eyes were watering from the diesel fumes. The air was as filthy as the ground beneath him.

He was beginning to regret coming—but then he saw it. His uncle's BMW was parked a few yards away, separated from the other cars. At first glance it looked absolutely fine, the metallic silver bodywork not even scratched. Certainly there was no way that this car could have been involved in a fatal collision with a truck or with anything else. But it was definitely his uncle's car. Alex recognized the license plate. He hurried closer and it was now that he saw that the car was damaged after all. The windshield had been smashed, along with all the windows on the driver's side. Alex made his way around to the other side. And froze.

Ian Rider hadn't died in any accident. What had killed him was plain to see—even to someone who had never seen such a thing before. A spray of bullets had caught the car full on the driver's side, shattering the front tire, smashing the windshield and side windows, and punching into the side panels. Alex ran his fingers over the holes. The metal felt cold against his flesh. He opened the door and looked inside. The front seats pale gray leather, were strewn with fragments of broken glass and stained with patches of dark brown. He didn't need to ask what the stain was. He could see everything. The flash of the machine gun, the bullets ripping into the car, Ian Rider jerking in the driver's seat ...

But why? Why kill a bank manager? And why had the murder been covered up? It was the police who had delivered the news that night, so they must be part of it. Had they lied deliberately? None of it made sense.

“You should have gotten rid of it two days ago. Do it now...”

The machines must have stopped for a moment. If there hadn't been a sudden lull, Alex would never have heard the men coming. Quickly he looked across the steering wheel and out the other side. There were two of them, both dressed in loose-fitting overalls. Alex had a feeling he'd seen them before. At the funeral. One of them was the driver, the man he had seen with the gun. He was sure of it.

Whoever they were, they were only a few paces away from the car, talking in low voices. Another few steps and they would be there. Without thinking, Alex threw himself into the only hiding place available: inside the car itself. Using his foot, he hooked the door and closed it. At the same time, he became aware that the machines had started again and he could no longer hear the men. He didn't dare look up. A shadow fell across the window as the two men passed. But then they were gone. He was safe.

And then something hit the BMW with such force that Alex cried out, his whole body caught in a massive shock wave that tore him away from the steering wheel and threw him helplessly into the back. The roof buckled and three huge metal fingers tore through the skin of the car like a fork through an eggshell, trailing dust and sunlight. One of the fingers grazed the side of his head ... any closer and it would have cracked his skull. Alex yelled as blood trickled over his eye. He tried to move, then

was jerked back a second time as the car was yanked off the ground and tilted high up in the air.

He couldn't see. He couldn't move. But his stomach lurched as the car swung in an arc, the metal grinding and the light spinning. The BMW had been picked up by the crane. It was going to be put inside the crusher. With him inside.

He tried to raise himself up, to wave through the windows. But the claw of the crane had already flattened the roof, pinning his left leg, perhaps even breaking it. He could feel nothing. He lifted a hand and managed to pound on the back window, but he couldn't break the glass. Even if the workmen were staring at the BMW, they would never see anything moving inside.

His short flight across the junkyard ended with a bone-shattering crash as the crane deposited the car on the iron shelves of the crusher. Alex tried to fight back his sickness and despair and think of what to do.

Any moment now the operator would send the car tipping into the coffin-shaped trough. The machine was a Lefort Shear, a slow-motion guillotine. At the press of a button, the two wings would close on the car with a joint pressure of five hundred tons. The car, with Alex inside it, would be crushed beyond recognition. And the broken metal—and flesh—would then be chopped into sections. Nobody would ever know what had happened.

He tried with all his strength to free himself. But the roof was too low. His leg was trapped. Then his whole world tilted and he felt himself falling into darkness. The shelves had lifted. The BMW slid to one side and fell the few yards into the trough. Alex felt the metalwork collapsing all around him. The back window exploded and glass showered around his head, dust and diesel fumes punching into his nose and eyes.

There was hardly any daylight now, but looking out of the back, he could see the huge steel head of the piston that would push what was left of the car through the exit hole on the other side.

The engine tone of the Lefort Shear changed as it prepared for the final act. The metal wings shuddered. In a few seconds' time the two of them would meet, crumpling the BMW like a paper bag.

Alex pulled with all his strength and was astonished when his leg came free. It took him perhaps a second

—one precious second—to work out what had happened. When the car had fallen into the trough, it had landed on its side. The roof had buckled again just enough to free him. His hand scrabbled for the door—

but, of course, that was useless. The doors were too bent. They would never open. The back window! With the glass gone, he could crawl through the frame, but only if he moved fast.

The wings began to move. The BMW screamed as two walls of solid steel relentlessly crushed it. More glass shattered. One of the wheel axles snapped with the sound of a thunderbolt. Darkness began to close in.

Alex grabbed hold of what was left of the backseat. Ahead of him he could see a single triangle of light, shrinking faster and faster. He could feel the weight of the two walls pressing down on him. The car was no longer a car but the fist of some hideous monster snatching at the insect that Alex had become.

With all his strength, he surged forward. His shoulders passed through the triangle, out into the light. Next came his legs, but at the last moment his shoe caught on a piece of jagged metal. He jerked and the shoe was pulled off, falling back into the car. Alex heard the sound of the leather being squashed. Finally, clinging to the black, oily surface of the observation platform at the back of the crusher, he dragged himself clear and managed to stand up.

He found himself face-to-face with a man so fat that he could barely fit into the small cabin of the crusher.

The man's stomach was pressed against the glass, his shoulders squeezed into the corners. A cigarette dangled on his lower lip as his mouth fell open and his eyes stared. What he saw was a boy in the rags of what had once been a school uniform. A whole sleeve had been torn off and his arm, streaked with blood and oil, hung limply by his side. By the time the operator had taken this all in, come to his senses, and turned the machine off, the boy had gone.

Alex clambered down the side of the crusher, landing on the one foot that still had a shoe. He was aware now of the pieces of jagged metal lying everywhere. If he wasn't careful, he would cut open the other foot.

His bicycle was where he had left it, leaning against the wall, and gingerly, half hopping, he made for it.

Behind him he heard the cabin of the crusher open and a man's voice called out, raising the alarm. At the same time a second man ran forward, stopping between Alex and his bike. It was the driver, the man he had seen at the funeral. His face, twisted into a hostile frown, was curiously ugly: greasy hair, watery eyes, pale, lifeless skin.

"What do you think..." he began. His hand slid into his jacket. Alex remembered the gun and, instantly, without even thinking, swung into action.

He had started learning karate when he was six years old. One afternoon, with no explanation, Ian Rider had taken him to a local club for his first lesson and he had been going there, once a week, ever since. Over the years he had passed through the various Kyu-student grades. But it was only the year before that he had become a first-grade Dan, a black belt. When he had arrived at Brookland School, his gentle looks and accent had quickly brought him to the attention of the school bullies; three hulking sixteen-year-olds. They had cornered him once behind the bike shed. The encounter lasted less than a minute. The next day one of the bullies had left Brookland, and the other two had never troubled anyone again.

Now Alex brought up one leg, twisted his body around, and lashed out. The back kick—Ushiro-geri—is said to be the most lethal in karate. His foot powered into the man's abdomen with such force that the man didn't even have time to cry out. His eyes bulged and his mouth half opened in surprise. Then, with his hand still halfway into his jacket, he crumpled to the ground.

Alex jumped over him, snatched up his bike, and swung himself onto it. In the distance a third man was running toward him. He heard the single word "Stop!" called out. Then there was a crack and a bullet whipped past. Alex gripped the handlebars and pedaled as hard as he could. The bike shot forward, over the rubble and out through the gates. He took one look over his shoulder. Nobody had followed him.

With one shoe on and one shoe off, his clothes in rags, and his body streaked with oil, Alex knew he

must look a strange sight. But then he thought back to his last seconds inside the crusher and sighed with relief.

He could be looking a lot worse.

ROYAL & GENERAL

THE BANK CALLED the following day.

“This is John Crawley. Do you remember me? Personnel manager at the Royal and General. We were wondering if you could come in.”

“Come in?” Alex was half dressed, already late for school.

“This afternoon. We found some papers of your uncle’s. We need to talk to you ... about your own position.”

Was there something faintly threatening in the man’s voice? “What time this afternoon?” Alex asked.

“Could you manage half past four? We’re on Liverpool Street. We can send a cab—”

“I’ll be there,” Alex said. “And I’ll take the tube.”

He hung up.

“Who was that?” Jack called out of the kitchen. She was cooking breakfast for the two of them, although how long she could remain with Alex was a growing worry. Her wages hadn’t been paid. She had only her own money to buy food and pay for the running of the house. Worse still, her visa was about to expire.

Soon she wouldn’t even be allowed to stay in the country.

“That was the bank.” Alex came into the room, wearing his spare uniform. He hadn’t told her what had happened at the junk yard. Jack had enough on her mind. “I’m going there this afternoon,” he said.

“Do you want me to come?”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

He came out of Liverpool Street tube station just after four-fifteen that afternoon, still wearing his school clothes: dark blue jacket, gray trousers, striped tie. He found the bank easily enough. The Royal & General occupied a tall, antique-looking building with a Union Jack fluttering from a pole about fifteen floors up.

There was a brass plaque with the name next to the main door and a security camera swiveling slowly over the pavement.

Alex stopped in front of it. For a moment he wondered if he was making a mistake, going in. If the bank had been responsible in some way for Ian Rider’s death, it was always possible they had asked him here to arrange his own. But why would anyone from the bank want to kill him? He didn’t even have an account there. He went inside.

And in an office on the seventeenth floor, the image on the television monitor flickered and changed as Street Camera #1 smoothly cut across to Reception cameras #2 and #3. Everything was dark and shadowy inside. A man sitting behind a desk saw Alex come in and pressed a button. Camera #2 zoomed in until Alex’s face filled the screen.

“So he came,” the chairman of the bank muttered.

“That’s the boy?” The speaker was a middle-aged woman. She had a strange, potato-shaped head and her black hair looked as if it had been cut using a pair of blunt scissors and an upturned bowl. Her eyes were almost as black as her hair. She was dressed in a severe gray suit and was sucking a peppermint. “Are you sure about this, Alan?” she asked.

Alan Blunt nodded. “Oh yes. Quite sure. You know what to do?” This last question was addressed to his driver, who was also in the room.

The driver was standing uncomfortably, slightly hunched over. His face was a chalky white. He had been like that ever since he had tried to stop Alex in the auto junkyard. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“Then do it,” Blunt said. His eyes never left the screen.

In the lobby, Alex had asked for John Crawley and was sitting on a leather sofa, vaguely wondering why so few people were going in or out. The reception area was quiet and claustrophobic, with a brown marble floor, three elevators to one side, and above the desk, a row of clocks showing the time in every major world city. But it could have been the entrance to anywhere. A hospital. A concert hall. Even a cruise liner.

The place had no identity of its own.

One of the elevators slid open and Crawley appeared in the same suit he had worn at the funeral but with a different tie. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, Alex,” he said. “Have you come straight from school?”

Alex stood up but said nothing, allowing his uniform to answer the man’s question.

“Let’s go up to my office,” Crawley said. He gestured. “We’ll take the elevator.”

Alex didn’t notice the fourth camera inside the elevator, but then, it was concealed on the other side of the oneway mirror that covered the back wall. Nor did he see the thermal intensifier next to the camera. But this second machine both looked at him and through him as he stood there, turning him into a pulsating mass of different colors, none of which translated into the cold steel of a hidden gun or knife. In less than the time it took Alex to blink, the machine had passed its information down to a computer that had instantly evaluated and then sent its own signal back to the circuits that controlled the elevator. It’s OK.

He’s unarmed. Continue to the fifteenth floor.

“Here we are!” Crawley smiled and ushered Alex out into a long corridor, with an uncarpeted wooden floor and modern lighting. A series of doors were punctuated by brightly colored abstract paintings. “My office is just along here.” Crawley pointed the way.

They had passed three doors when Alex stopped. Each door had a nameplate and this one he knew. 1504: Ian Rider. White letters on black plastic.

Crawley nodded sadly. “Yes. This was where your uncle worked. He’ll be much missed.”

“Can I go inside?” Alex asked.

Crawley seemed surprised. “Why do you want to do that?”

“I’d be interested to see where he worked.”

“I’m sorry.” Crawley sighed. “The door will have been locked and I don’t have the key. Another time

perhaps.” He gestured again. He used his hands like a magician, as if he were about to produce a fan of cards. “I have the office next door. Just here...”

They went into 1505. It was a large, square room with three windows looking out over the station. There was a flutter of red and blue outside and Alex remembered the flag he had seen. The flagpole was right next to the office. Inside there was a desk and chair, a couple of sofas, in the corner a fridge, on the wall a couple of prints. A boring executive’s office. Perfect for a boring executive.

“Please, Alex. Sit down,” Crawley said. He went over to the fridge. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Do you have Coke?”

“Yes.” Crawley opened a can and filled a glass, then handed it to Alex. “Ice?”

“No, thanks.” Alex took a sip. It wasn’t Coke. It wasn’t even Pepsi. He recognized the oversweet, slightly cloying taste of supermarket cola and wished he’d asked for water. “So what do you want to talk to me about?”

“Your uncle’s will...”

The telephone rang and with another hand sign, this one for “excuse me,” Crawley answered it. He spoke for a few moments, then hung up again. “I’m very sorry, Alex. I have to go back down to the lobby. Do you mind?”

“Go ahead.” Alex settled himself on the sofa.

“I’ll be about five minutes.” With a final nod of apology, Crawley left.

Alex waited a few seconds. Then he poured the cola into a potted plant and stood up. He went over to the door and back into the corridor. At the far end a woman carrying a bunch of papers appeared and disappeared through a door. There was no sign of Crawley. Quickly, Alex moved back to the door of 1504

and tried the handle. But Crawley had been telling the truth. It was locked.

Alex went back into Crawley’s office. He would have given anything to spend a few minutes alone in Ian Rider’s office. Somebody thought the dead man’s work was important enough to keep hidden from him.

They had broken into his house and cleaned out everything they’d found in the office there. Perhaps the office next door might tell him why. What exactly was Ian Rider involved in? And was it the reason why he had been killed?

The flag fluttered again and, seeing it, Alex went over to the window. The pole jutted out of the building exactly halfway between rooms 1504 and 1505. If he could somehow reach it, he should be able to jump onto the ledge that ran along the side of the building outside room 1504. Of course, he was fifteen floors up. If he jumped and missed, there would be a couple of hundred feet to fall. It was a stupid idea. It wasn’t even worth thinking about.

Alex opened the window and climbed out. It was better not to think about it at all. He would just do it.

After all, if this was the ground floor, or a jungle gym in the school yard, it would be child’s play. It was only the sheer brick wall stretching down to the pavement, the cars and buses moving like toys so

far below, and the blast of the wind against his face that made it terrifying. Don't think about it. Do it.

Alex lowered himself onto the ledge outside Crawley's office. His hands were behind him, clutching onto the windowsill. He took a deep breath. And jumped.

A camera in the office across the road caught Alex as he launched himself into space. Two floors above, Alan Blunt was still sitting in front of the screen. He chuckled. It was a humorless sound. "I told you," he said. "The boy's extraordinary."

"The boy's quite mad," the woman retorted.

"Well, maybe that's what we need."

"You're just going to sit here and watch him kill himself?"

"I'm going to sit here and hope that he survives."

Alex had miscalculated the jump. He had missed the flagpole by an inch and would have plunged down to the pavement if his hands hadn't caught hold of the Union Jack itself. He was hanging now with his feet in midair. Slowly, with huge effort, he pulled himself up, his fingers hooking into the material. Somehow he managed to climb back up onto the pole. He still didn't look down. He just hoped that no passersby looked up.

It was easier after that. He squatted on the pole, then threw himself sideways and across to the ledge outside Ian Rider's office. He had to be careful. Too far to the left and he would crash into the side of the building, but too far the other way and he would fall. In fact, he landed perfectly, grabbing hold of the ledge with both hands and then pulling himself up until he was level with the window. It was only now that he wondered if the window would be locked. If so, he'd just have to go back.

It wasn't. Alex slid the window open and hoisted himself into the second office, which was in many ways a carbon copy of the first. It had the same furniture, the same carpet, even a similar painting on the wall. He went over to the desk and sat down. The first thing he saw was a photograph of himself, taken the summer before on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, where he had gone diving. There was a second picture tucked into the corner of the frame. Alex aged five or six. He was surprised and a little saddened by the photographs. Ian Rider had been more sentimental than he had pretended.

Alex glanced at his watch. About three minutes had passed since Crawley had left the office and he had said he would be back in five. If he was going to find anything here, he had to find it quickly. He pulled open a drawer in the desk. It contained four or five thick files. Alex took them and opened them. He saw at once that they had nothing to do with banking.

The first was marked: NERVE POISONS. NEW METHODS OF CONCEALMENT AND DISSEMINATION.

Alex put it aside and looked at the second. ASSASSINATIONS: FOUR CASE STUDIES. Growing ever more puzzled, he quickly flicked through the rest of the files, which covered counterterrorism, the movement of uranium across Europe, and interrogation techniques. The last file was simply labeled: STORMBREAKER.

Alex was about to read it when the door suddenly opened and two men walked in. One of them was Crawley. The other was the driver from the junkyard. Alex knew that there was no point trying to explain what he was doing. He was sitting behind the desk with the Stormbreaker file open in his

hands. But at the same time he realized that the two men weren't surprised to see him there. From the way they had come into the room, they had expected to find him.

"This isn't a bank," Alex said. "Who are you? Was my uncle working for you? Did you kill him?"

"So many questions," Crawley muttered. "But I'm afraid we're not authorized to give you the answers."

The second man lifted his hand and Alex saw that he was holding a gun. He stood up behind the desk, holding the file as if to protect himself. "No..." he began.

The man fired. There was no explosion. The gun spat at Alex and he felt something slam into his heart. His hand opened and the file tumbled to the ground. Then his legs buckled, the room twisted, and he fell back into nothing.

“SO WHAT DO YOU SAY?”

ALEX OPENED HIS EYES. So he was still alive! That was a nice surprise.

He was lying on a bed in a large, comfortable room. The bed was modern, but the room was old with beams running across the ceiling, a stone fireplace, and narrow windows in an ornate wooden frame. He had seen rooms like this in books when he was studying Shakespeare. He would have said the building was Elizabethan. It had to be somewhere in the country. There was no sound of traffic. Outside he could see trees.

Someone had undressed him. His school uniform was gone. Instead he was wearing loose pajamas, silk from the feel of them. From the light outside he would have guessed it was midmorning. He found his watch lying on the table beside the bed and he reached out for it. The time was twelve o'clock. It had been around half past four when he had been shot with what must have been a drugged dart. He had lost a whole night and half a day.

There was a bathroom leading off from the bedroom—bright white tiles and a huge shower behind a cylinder of glass and chrome. Alex stripped off the pajamas and stood for five minutes under a jet of steaming water. He felt better after that.

He went back into the bedroom and opened the closet. Someone had been to his house in Chelsea. All his clothes were here, neatly hung up. He wondered what Crawley had told Jack. Presumably he would have made up some story to explain Alex's sudden disappearance. He took out a pair of Gap combat trousers, Nike sweatshirt and sneakers, got dressed, then sat on the bed and waited.

About fifteen minutes later there was a knock and the door opened. A young Asian woman in a nurse's uniform came in, beaming.

“Oh, you're awake. And dressed. How are you feeling? Not too groggy, I hope. Please come this way.

Mr. Blunt is expecting you for lunch.”

Alex hadn't spoken a word to her. He followed her out of the room, along a corridor and down a flight of stairs. The house was indeed Elizabethan, with wooden panels along the corridors, ornate chandeliers, and oil paintings of old bearded men in tunics and ruffs. The stairs led down into a tall galleried room with a rug spread out over flagstones and a fireplace big enough to park a car in. A long, polished wooden table had been set for three. Alan Blunt and a dark, rather masculine woman sucking a peppermint were already sitting down. Mrs. Blunt?

“Alex.” Blunt smiled briefly as if it was something he didn't enjoy doing. “It's good of you to join us.”

Alex sat down. “You didn't give me a lot of choice.”

“Yes. I don't quite know what Crawley was thinking of, having you shot like that, but I suppose it was the easiest way. May I introduce my colleague, Mrs. Jones.”

The woman nodded at Alex. Her eyes seemed to examine him minutely, but she said nothing.

“Who are you?” Alex asked. “What do you want with me?”

“I’m sure you have a great many questions. But first, let’s eat...” Blunt must have pressed a hidden button or else he was being overheard, for at that precise moment a door opened and a waiter—in white jacket and black trousers—appeared carrying three plates. “I hope you like meat,” Blunt continued. “Today it’s carre’d’agneu.”

“You mean, roast lamb.”

“The chef is French.”

Alex waited until the food had been served. Blunt and Mrs. Jones drank red wine. He stuck to water.

Finally, Blunt began.

“As I’m sure you’ve gathered,” he said, “the Royal and General is not a bank. In fact, it doesn’t exist ... it’s nothing more than a cover. And it follows, of course, that your uncle had nothing to do with banking. He worked for me. My name, as I told you at the funeral, is Blunt. I am the chief executive of the Special Operations Division of MI6. And your uncle was, for want of a better word, a spy.”

Alex couldn’t help smiling. “You mean ... like James Bond?”

“Similar, although we don’t go in for numbers. Double 0 and all the rest of it. Your uncle was a field agent, highly trained and very courageous. He successfully completed assignments in Iran, Washington, Hong Kong, and Havana ... to name but a few. I imagine this must come as a bit of a shock for you.”

Alex thought about the dead man, what he had known of him. His privacy. His long absences abroad. And the times he had come home injured. A bandaged arm one time. A bruised face another. Little accidents, Alex had been told. But now it all made sense. “I’m not shocked,” he said.

Blunt cut a neat slice off his meat. “Ian Rider’s luck ran out on his last mission,” he went on. “He had been working undercover here in England, in Cornwall, and was driving back to London to make a report when he was killed. You saw his car at the yard—”

“Stryker and Son,” Alex muttered. “Who are they?”

“Just people we use. We have budget restraints. We have to contract some of our work out. We hired them to clean things up. Mrs. Jones here is our head of operations. It was she who gave your uncle his last assignment.”

“We’re very sorry to have lost him, Alex.” The woman spoke for the first time. She didn’t sound very sorry at all.

“Do you know who killed him?”

“Yes .

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No. Not now.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t need to know. Not at this stage.”

“All right.” Alex considered what he did know. “My uncle was a spy. Thanks to you he’s dead. I

found out too much so you knocked me out and brought me here. Where am I, by the way?"

"This is one of our training centers," Mrs. Jones said.

"You've brought me here because you don't want me to tell anyone what I know. Is that what this is all about? Because if it is, I'll sign the Official Secrets Act or whatever it is you want me to do, but then I'd like to go home. This is all crazy, anyway. And I've had enough. I'm out of here."

Blunt coughed quietly. "It's not quite as easy as that," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's certainly true that you did draw attention to yourself both at the junkyard and then at our offices on Liverpool Street. And it's also true that what you know and what I'm about to tell you must go no further.

But the fact of the matter is, Alex, that we need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes." He paused. "Have you heard of a man called Herod Sayle?"

Alex thought for a moment. "I've seen his name in the newspapers. He's something to do with computers.

And he owns racehorses. Doesn't he come from somewhere in Egypt?"

"Yes. From Cairo." Blunt took a sip of wine. "Let me tell you his story, Alex. I'm sure you'll find it of interest.

"Herod Sayle was born in complete poverty in the backstreets of Cairo. His father was a failed oral hygienist. His mother took in washing. He had nine brothers and four sisters, all living together in three small rooms along with the family goat. Young Herod never went to school and he should have ended up unemployed, unable to read or write, like the rest of them.

"But when he was seven, something occurred that changed his life. He was walking down Fez Street—in the middle of Cairo—when he happened to see an upright piano fall out of a fourteenth-story window.

Apparently it was being moved and it somehow overturned. Anyway, there were a couple of English tourists walking along the pavement underneath and they would both have been crushed—no doubt about it—except at the last minute Herod threw himself at them and pushed them out of the way. The piano missed them by an inch.

"Of course, the tourists were enormously grateful to the young Egyptian waif and it now turned out that they were very rich. They made inquiries about him and discovered how poor he was ... the very clothes he was wearing had been passed down by all nine of his brothers. And so, out of gratitude, they more or less adopted him. Flew him out of Cairo and put him into a school over here, where he made astonishing progress. He got excellent exam results and—here's an amazing coincidence—at the age of fifteen he actually found himself sitting next to a boy who would grow up to become prime minister of Great Britain.

Our present prime minister, in fact. The two of them were at school together.

"I'll move quickly forward. After school, Sayle went to Cambridge, where he got a degree in

economics. He then set out on a career that went from success to success. His own radio station, computer software ...

and, yes, he even found time to buy a string of racehorses, although I believe they seldom win. But what drew him to our attention was his most recent invention. A quite revolutionary computer that he calls the Stormbreaker.”

Stormbreaker. Alex remembered the file he had found in Ian Rider’s office. Things were beginning to come together.

“The Stormbreaker is being manufactured by Sayle Enterprises,” Mrs. Jones said. “There’s been a lot of talk about the design. It has a black keyboard and black casing.”

“With a lightning bolt going down the side,” Alex said. He had seen a picture of it in PC Review.

“It doesn’t only look different,” Blunt cut in. “It’s based on a completely new technology. It uses something called the round processor. I don’t suppose that will mean anything to you.”

“It’s an integrated circuit on a sphere of silicon about one millimeter in diameter,” Alex said. “It’s ninety percent cheaper to produce than an ordinary chip because the whole thing is sealed in so you don’t need clean rooms for production.”

“Oh. Yes...” Blunt coughed. “I’m surprised you know so much about it.”

“It must be my age,” Alex said.

“Well,” Blunt continued, “the point is, later today, Sayle Enterprises are going to make a quite remarkable announcement. They are planning to give away tens of thousands of these computers. In fact, it is their intention to ensure that every secondary school in England gets its own Stormbreaker. It’s an unparalleled act of generosity, Sayle’s way of thanking the country that gave him a home.”

“So the man’s a hero.”

“So it would seem. He wrote to Downing Street a few months ago: ‘My dear Prime Minister. You may remember me from our school days together. For almost forty years I have lived in England and I wish to make a gesture, something that will never be forgotten, to express my true feelings toward your country.’

The letter went on to describe the gift and was signed, ‘Yours humbly,’ by the man himself. Of course, the whole government was excited. The computers are being assembled at the Sayle plant down in Port Tallon, Cornwall. They’ll be shipped across the country at the end of this month, and on April first there’s to be a special ceremony at the Science Museum in London. The prime minister is going to press the button that will bring all the computers on-line ... the whole lot of them. And—this is top secret, by the way—

Mr. Sayle is to be rewarded with British citizenship, which is something he has apparently always wanted.”

“Well, I’m very happy for him,” Alex said. “But you still haven’t told me what this has got to do with me.”

Blunt glanced at Mrs. Jones, who had finished her meal while he was talking. She unwrapped another peppermint and took over. “For some time now, this department—Special Operations—has been

concerned about Mr. Sayle. The fact of the matter is, we've been wondering if he isn't too good to be true. I won't go into all the details, Alex, but we've been looking at his business dealings—he has contacts in China and the former Soviet Union, countries that have never been our friends. The government may think he's a saint, but there's a ruthless side to him too. And the security arrangements down at Port Tallon worry us. He's more or less formed his own private army. He's acting as if he's got something to hide."

"Not that anyone will listen to us," Blunt muttered.

"Exactly. The government's too keen to get their hands on these computers to listen to us. That was why we decided to send our own man down to the plant. Supposedly to check on security. But, in fact, his job was to keep an eye on Herod Sayle."

"You're talking about my uncle," Alex said. Ian Rider had told him that he was going to an insurance convention. Another lie in a life that had been nothing but lies.

"Yes. He was there for three weeks and, like us, he didn't exactly take to Mr. Sayle. In his first reports he described him as short-tempered and unpleasant. But at the same time, he had to admit that everything seemed to be fine. Production was on schedule. The Stormbreakers were coming off the line. And everyone seemed to be happy.

"But then we got a message. Rider couldn't say very much because it was an open line, but he told us that something had happened. He said he'd discovered something. That the Stormbreakers mustn't leave the plant and that he was coming up to London at once. He left Port Tallon at four o'clock. He never even got to the freeway. He was ambushed in a quiet country lane. The local police found the car. We arranged for it to be brought up here."

Alex sat in silence. He could imagine it. A twisting lane with the trees just in blossom. The silver BMW

gleaming as it raced past. And, around a corner, a second car waiting ... "Why are you telling me all this?"

he asked.

"It proves what we were saying," Blunt replied. "We have our doubts about Sayle so we send a man down.

Our best man. He finds out something and he ends up dead. Maybe Rider discovered the truth—"

"But I don't understand!" Alex interrupted. "Sayle is giving away the computers. He's not making any money out of them. In return, he's getting a medal and British citizenship. Fine—what's he got to hide?"

"We don't know," Blunt said. "We just don't know. But we want to find out. And soon. Before these computers leave the plant."

"They're being shipped out on March thirty-first," Mrs. Jones added. "Only three weeks from now." She glanced at Blunt. He nodded. "That's why it's essential for us to send someone else to Port Tallon. Someone to continue where your uncle left off."

Alex smiled queasily. "I hope you're not looking at me."

“We can’t just send in another agent,” Mrs. Jones said. “The enemy has shown his hand. He’s killed Rider.

He’ll be expecting a replacement. Somehow we have to trick him.”

“We have to send someone in who won’t be noticed,” Blunt continued. “Someone who can look around and report back without being seen. We were considering sending down a woman. She might be able to slip in as a cleaner or a kitchen helper. But then I had a better idea.

“A few months ago, one of these computer magazines ran a competition. ‘Be the first boy or girl to use the Stormbreaker. Travel to Port Tallon and meet Herod Sayle himself’ That was the first prize—and it was won by some young chap who’s apparently a bit of a whiz kid when it comes to computers. Name of Felix Lester. Fourteen years old. The same age as yourself. He looks a bit like you too. He’s expected down at Port Tallon two weeks from now.”

“Wait a minute—”

“You’ve already shown yourself to be extraordinarily brave and resourceful,” Blunt said. “First at the junkyard ... that was a karate kick, wasn’t it? How long have you been learning karate?” Alex didn’t answer so Blunt went on. “And then there was that little test we arranged for you at the bank. Any boy who would climb out of a fifteenth floor window just to satisfy his own curiosity has to be rather special, and it seems to me that you are very special indeed.”

“What we’re suggesting is that you come and work for us,” Mrs. Jones said. “We have enough time to give you some basic training—not that you’ll probably need it—and we can equip you with a few items that may help you with what we have in mind. Then we’ll arrange for you to take the place of this other boy.

We’ll pack him off to Florida or somewhere ... give him a holiday as a consolation prize. You’ll go to Sayle Enterprises on March twenty-ninth. That’s when the Lester boy is expected. You’ll stay there until April first, which is the day of the ceremony. The timing couldn’t be better. You’ll be able to meet Herod Sayle, keep an eye on him, tell us what you think. Perhaps you’ll also find out what it was that your uncle discovered and why he had to die for it. You shouldn’t be in any danger. After all, who would suspect a fourteen-year-old boy of being a spy?”

“All we’re asking you to do is to report back to us,” Blunt said. “April first is just three weeks from now.

That’s all we’re asking. Three weeks of your time. A chance to make sure these computers are everything they’re cracked up to be. A chance to serve your country.”

Blunt had finished his lunch. His plate was completely clean, as if there had never been any food on it at all. He put down his knife and fork, laying them precisely side by side. “All right, Alex,” he said. “So what do you say?”

There was a long pause.

Alex put down his own knife and fork. He hadn’t eaten anything. Blunt was watching him with polite interest. Mrs. Jones was unwrapping yet another peppermint, her black eyes seemingly fixed on the twist of paper in her hands.

“No,” Alex said.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s a dumb idea. I don’t want to be a spy. I want to play soccer. Anyway, I have a life of my own.” He found it difficult to choose the right words. The whole thing was so preposterous he almost wanted to laugh. “Why don’t you ask this Felix Lester to snoop around for you?”

“We don’t believe he’d be as resourceful as you,” Blunt said.

“He’s probably better at computer games.” Alex shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m just not interested. I don’t want to get involved.”

“That’s a pity,” Blunt said. His tone of voice hadn’t changed, but there was a heavy, dead quality to the words. And there was something different about him. Throughout the meal he had been polite—not friendly but at least human. In an instant that had disappeared. Alex thought of a toilet chain being pulled.

The human part of him had just been flushed away.

“We’d better move on then to discuss your future,” he continued. “Like it or not, Alex, the Royal and General is now your legal guardian.”

“I thought you said the Royal and General didn’t exist.”

Blunt ignored him. “Ian Rider has, of course, left the house and all his money to you. However, he left it in trust until you are twenty-one. And we control that trust. So there will, I’m afraid, have to be some changes.

The American girl who lives with you—”

“Jack?”

“Miss Starbright. Her visa has expired. She’ll be returned to America. We propose to put the house on the market. Unfortunately, you have no relatives who would be prepared to look after you, so I’m afraid that also means you’ll have to leave Brookland. You’ll be sent to an institution. There’s one I know just outside Birmingham. The Saint Elizabeth in Sourbridge. Not a very pleasant place, but I’m afraid there’s no alternative.”

“You’re blackmailing me!” Alex exclaimed.

“Not at all.”

“But if I agreed to do what you asked ...?”

Blunt glanced at Mrs. Jones. “Help us and we’ll help you,” she said.

Alex considered, but not for very long. He had no choice and he knew it. Not when these people controlled his money, his present life, his entire future. “You talked about training,” he said.

Mrs. Jones nodded. “Felix Lester is expected at Port Tallon in two weeks,” she said. “That doesn’t give us very much time. But it’s also why we brought you here, Alex. This is a training center. If you agree to what we want, we can start at once.”

“Start at once.” Alex spoke the three words without liking the sound of them. Blunt and Mrs. Jones were waiting for his answer. He sighed. “Yeah. All right. It doesn’t look like I’ve got very much choice.”

He glanced at the slices of cold lamb on his plate. Dead meat. Suddenly he knew how it felt.

DOUBLE 0 NOTHING

FOR THE HUNDREDTH time, Alex cursed Alan Blunt, using language he hadn't even realized he knew. It was almost five o'clock in the evening, although it could have been five o'clock in the morning; the sky had barely changed at all throughout the day. It was gray, cold, unforgiving. The rain was still falling, a thin drizzle that traveled horizontally in the wind, soaking through his supposedly waterproof clothing, mixing with his sweat and his dirt, chilling him to the bone.

He unfolded his map and checked his position once again. He had to be close to the last RV of the day—the last rendezvous point—but he could see nothing. He was standing on a narrow track made up of loose gray pebbles that crunched under his combat boots when he walked. The track snaked around the side of a mountain with a sheer drop to the right. He was somewhere in the Brecon Beacons and there should have been a view, but it had been wiped out by the rain and the fading light. A few trees twisted out of the side of the hill with leaves as hard as thorns. Behind him, below him, ahead of him, it was all the same.

Nowhere Land.

Alex hurt. The 22-pound bergen backpack that he had been forced to wear cut into his shoulders and had rubbed blisters into his back. His right knee, where he had fallen earlier in the day, was no longer bleeding but still stung. His shoulder was bruised and there was a gash along the side of his neck. His camouflage outfit—he had swapped his Gap combat trousers for the real thing—fitted him badly, cutting in between his legs and under his arms but hanging loose everywhere else. He was close to exhaustion, he knew, almost too tired to know how much pain he was in. But for the glucose and caffeine tablets in his survival pack, he would have ground to a halt hours ago. He knew that if he didn't find the RV soon, he would be physically unable to continue. Then he would be thrown off the course. "Binned" as they called it. They would like that. Swallowing down the taste of defeat, Alex folded the map and forced himself on.

It was his ninth—or maybe his tenth—day of training. Time had begun to dissolve into itself, as shapeless as the rain. After his lunch with Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones, he had been moved out of the manor house and into a crude wooden hut a few miles away. There were nine huts in total, each equipped with four metal beds and four metal lockers. A fifth had been squeezed into one of them to accommodate Alex. Two more huts, painted a different color, stood side by side. One of these was a kitchen and mess hall. The other contained toilets, sinks, and showers—with not a single hot faucet in sight.

On his first day there, Alex had been introduced to his training officer, an incredibly fit black sergeant. He was the sort of man who thought he'd seen everything. Until he saw Alex. And he had examined the new arrival for a long minute before he had spoken.

"It's not my job to ask questions," he had said. "But if it was, I'd want to know what they're thinking of, sending me children. Do you have any idea where you are, boy? This isn't a holiday camp. This isn't Disneyland." He cut the word into its three syllables and spat them out. "I have you for twelve days and they expect me to give you the sort of training that should take fourteen weeks. That's not just mad. That's suicidal."

“I didn’t ask to be here,” Alex said.

Suddenly the sergeant was furious. “You don’t speak to me unless I give you permission,” he shouted.

“And when you speak to me, you address me as ‘sir.’ Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Alex had already decided that the man was even worse than his geography teacher.

“There are five units operational here at the moment,” the officer went on. “You’ll join K Unit. We don’t use names. I have no name. You have no name. If anyone asks you what you’re doing, you tell them nothing.

Some of the men may be hard on you. Some of them may resent you being here. That’s too bad. You’ll just have to live with it. And there’s something else you need to know. I can make allowances for you. You’re a boy, not a man. But if you complain, you’ll be binned. If you cry, you’ll be binned. If you can’t keep up, you’ll be binned. Between you and me, boy, this is a mistake and I want to bin you.”

After that, Alex joined K Unit. As the sergeant had predicted, they weren’t exactly overjoyed to see him.

There were four of them. As Alex was soon to discover, the Special Operations Division of M16 sent its agents to the same training center used by the Special Air Service—the SAS. Much of the training was based on SAS methods and this included the numbers and makeup of each team. So there were four men, each with their own special skills. And one boy, seemingly with none.

They were all in their mid-twenties, spread out over the bunks in companionable silence. Two of them were smoking. One was dismantling and reassembling his gun—a 9mm Browning High Power pistol. Each of them had been given a code name: Wolf, Fox, Eagle, and Snake. From now on, Alex would be known as Cub. The leader, Wolf, was the one with the gun. He was short and muscular with square shoulders and black, close-cropped hair. He had a handsome face, made slightly uneven by his nose, which had been broken at some time in the past.

He was the first to speak. Putting the gun down, he examined Alex with cold dark brown eyes. “So who the hell do you think you are?” he demanded.

“Cub,” Alex replied.

“A bloody schoolboy!” Wolf spoke with a strange, slightly foreign accent. “I don’t believe it. Are you with Special Operations?”

“I’m not allowed to tell you that.” Alex went over to his bunk and sat down. The mattress felt as solid as the frame. Despite the cold, there was only one blanket.

Wolf shook his head and smiled humorlessly. “Look what they’ve sent us,” he muttered. “Double 0 Seven?”

Double 0 Nothing’s more like it.”

After that, the name stuck. Double 0 Nothing was what they called him.

In the days that followed, Alex shadowed the group, not quite part of it but never far away. Almost everything they did, he did. He learned map reading, radio communication, and first aid. He took part in an unarmed combat class and was knocked to the ground so often that it took all his nerve to persuade himself to get up again.

And then there was the assault course. Five times he was shouted and bullied across the nightmare of nets and ladders, tunnels and ditches, towering walls and swinging tightropes that stretched out for almost a quarter of a mile in, and over, the woodland beside the huts. Alex thought of it as the adventure playground from hell. The first time he tried it, he fell off a rope and into a pit filled with freezing slime.

Half drowned and filthy, he had been sent back to the start by the sergeant. Alex thought he would never get to the end, but the second time he finished it in twenty-five minutes, which he had cut to seventeen minutes by the end of the week. Bruised and exhausted though he was, he was quietly pleased with himself. Even Wolf only managed it in twelve.

Wolf remained actively hostile toward Alex. The other three men simply ignored him, but Wolf did everything to taunt or humiliate him. It was as if Alex had somehow insulted him by being placed in the group. Once, crawling under the nets, Wolf lashed out with his foot, missing Alex's face by an inch. Of course he would have said it was an accident if the boot had connected. Another time he was more successful, tripping Alex up in the mess hall and sending him flying, along with his tray, cutlery, and steaming plate of stew. And every time he spoke to Alex, he used the same sneering tone of voice.

“Good night, Double 0 Nothing. Don't wet the bed.”

Alex bit his lip and said nothing. But he was glad when the four men were sent off for a day's jungle survival course—this wasn't part of his own training. Even though the sergeant worked him twice as hard once they were gone, Alex preferred to be on his own.

But on the tenth day, Wolf did come close to finishing him altogether. It happened in the Killing House.

The Killing House was a fake—a mock-up of an embassy used to train the SAS in the art of hostage release.

Alex had twice watched K Unit go into the house, the first time swinging down from the roof, and had followed their progress on closed-circuit TV. All four men were armed. Alex himself didn't take part because someone somewhere had decided he shouldn't carry a gun. Inside the Killing House, mannequins had been arranged as terrorists and hostages. Smashing down the doors and using stun grenades to clear the rooms with deafening, multiple blasts, Wolf, Fox, Eagle, and Snake had successfully completed their mission both times.

This time Alex had joined them. The Killing House had been booby-trapped. They weren't told how. All five of them were unarmed. Their job was simply to get from one end of the house to the other without being “killed.”

They almost made it. In the first room, made up to look like a huge dining room, they found the pressure pads under the carpet and the infrared beams across the doors. For Alex it was an eerie experience, tiptoeing behind the other four men, watching as they dismantled the two devices, using cigarette smoke to expose the otherwise invisible beam. It was strange to be afraid of everything and yet to see nothing. In the hallway there was a motion detector, which would have activated a machine gun (Alex assumed it was loaded with blanks) behind a Japanese screen. The third room was empty. The fourth was a living room with the exit, a pair of French windows, on the other side. There was a trip wire, barely thicker than a human hair, running the entire width of the room, and the French windows were alarmed. While Snake dealt with the alarm, Fox and Eagle prepared to neutralize the

trip wire, unclipping an electronic circuit board and a variety of tools from their belts.

Wolf stopped them. “Leave it. We’re out of here.” At the same moment, Snake signaled. He had deactivated the alarm. The French windows were open.

Snake was the first out. Then Fox and Eagle. Alex would have been the last to leave the room, but just as he reached the exit, he found Wolf blocking his way.

“Tough luck, Double 0 Nothing,” Wolf said. His voice was soft, almost kind.

The next thing Alex knew, the heel of Wolf’s palm had rammed into his chest, pushing him back with astonishing force. Taken by surprise, he lost his balance and fell, remembered the trip wire, and tried to twist his body to avoid it. But it was hopeless. His flailing left hand caught the wire. He actually felt it against his wrist. He hit the floor, pulling the wire with him.

The trip wire activated a stun grenade—a small device filled with a mixture of magnesium powder and mercury fulminate. The blast didn’t just deafen Alex, it shuddered right through him as if trying to rip out his heart. The light from the ignited mercury burned for a full five seconds. It was so blinding that even closing his eyes made no difference. Alex lay there with his face against the hard wooden floor, his hands scrabbling against his head, unable to move, waiting for it to end.

But even then it wasn’t over. When the flare finally died down, it was as if all the light in the room had burned out with it. Alex stumbled to his feet, unable to see or hear, not even sure anymore where he was.

He felt sick to his stomach. The room swayed around him. The heavy smell of chemicals hung in the air.

Ten minutes later he staggered out into the open. Wolf was waiting for him with the others, his face blank.

He had slipped out before Alex hit the ground. The unit’s training officer walked angrily over to him. Alex hadn’t expected to see a shred of concern in the man’s face and he wasn’t disappointed.

“Do you want to tell me what happened in there, Cub?” he demanded. When Alex didn’t answer, he went on. “You ruined the exercise. You fouled up. You could get the whole unit binned. So you’d better start telling me what went wrong.”

Alex glanced at Wolf. Wolf looked the other way. What should he say? Should he even try to tell the truth?

“Well?” The sergeant was waiting.

“Nothing happened, sir,” Alex said. “I just wasn’t looking where I was going. I stepped on something and there was an explosion.”

“If that was real life, you’d be dead,” the sergeant said. “What did I tell you? Sending me a child was a mistake. And a stupid, clumsy child who doesn’t look where he’s going ... that’s even worse!”

Alex stood where he was. He knew he was blushing. Half of him wanted to answer back, but he bit his tongue. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Wolf half smiling.

The sergeant had seen it too. “You think it’s so funny, Wolf? You can go clean up in there. And tonight you’d better get some rest. All of you. Because tomorrow you’ve got a thirty-mile hike. No

rations. No lighters. No fire. This is a survival course. And if you do survive, then maybe you'll have a reason to smile."

Alex remembered the words now, exactly twenty-four hours later. He had spent the last eleven of them on his feet, following the trail that the sergeant had set out for him on the map. The exercise had begun at six o'clock in the morning after a gray-lit breakfast of sausages and beans. Wolf and the others had disappeared into the distance ahead of him a long time ago, even though they had been given 55-pound backpacks to carry. They had also been given only eight hours to complete the course. Allowing for his age, Alex had been given twelve.

He rounded a corner, his feet scrunching on the gravel. There was someone standing ahead of him. It was the sergeant. He had just lit a cigarette and Alex watched him slide the matches back into his pocket. Seeing him there brought back the shame and the anger of the day before and at the same time sapped the last of his strength. Suddenly, Alex had had enough of Blunt, Mrs. Jones, Wolf ... the whole stupid thing. With a final effort he stumbled forward the last hundred yards and came to a halt. Rain and sweat trickled down the side of his face. His hair, dark now with grime, was glued across his forehead.

The sergeant looked at his watch. "Eleven hours, five minutes. That's not bad, Cub. But the others were here three hours ago."

Bully for them, Alex thought. He didn't say anything.

"Anyway, you should just make it to the first RV," the sergeant went on. "It's up there."

He pointed to a wall. Not a sloping wall. A sheer one. Solid rock rising two or three hundred feet up without a handhold or a foothold in sight. Even looking at it, Alex felt his stomach shrink. Ian Rider had taken him climbing ... in Scotland, in France, all over Europe. But he had never attempted anything as difficult as this. Not on his own. Not when he was so tired.

"I can't," he said. In the end the two words came out easily.

"I didn't hear that," the sergeant said.

"I said, I can't do it, sir."

"Can't isn't a word we use around here."

"I don't care. I've had enough. I've just had ..."

Alex's voice cracked. He didn't trust himself to go on.

He stood there, cold and empty, waiting for the ax to fall.

But it didn't. The sergeant gazed at him for a long minute. He nodded his head slowly. "Listen to me, Cub,"

he said. "I know what happened in the Killing House."

Alex glanced up.

"Wolf forgot about the closed-circuit TV. We've got it all on film."

"Then why—?" Alex began.

"Did you make a complaint against him, Cub?"

“No, sir.”

“Do you want to make a complaint against him, Cub?”

A pause. Then... “No, sir.”

“Good.” The sergeant pointed at the rock face, suggesting a path up with his finger. “It’s not as difficult as it looks,” he said. “And they’re waiting for you just over the top. You’ve got a nice cold dinner. Survival rations. You don’t want to miss that.”

Alex drew a deep breath and started forward. As he passed the sergeant, he stumbled and put out a hand to steady himself, brushing against him. “Sorry, sir ...” he said.

It took him twenty minutes to reach the top and sure enough K Unit was already there, crouching around three small tents that they must have pitched earlier in the afternoon. Two just large enough for sharing.

One, the smallest, for Alex.

Snake, a thin, fair-haired man who spoke with a Scottish accent, looked up at Alex. He had a tin of cold stew in one hand, a teaspoon in the other. “I didn’t think you’d make it,” he said. Alex couldn’t help but notice a certain warmth in the man’s voice. And for the first time he hadn’t called him Double 0 Nothing.

“Nor did I,” Alex said.

Wolf was squatting over what he hoped would become a campfire, trying to get it started with two flint stones while Fox and Eagle watched. He was getting nowhere. The stones only produced the smallest of sparks and the scraps of newspaper and leaves that he had collected were already far too wet. Wolf struck at the stones again and again. The others watched, their faces glum.

Alex held out the box of matches that he had pickpocketed from the sergeant when he had pretended to stumble at the foot of the rock face. “These might help,” he said.

He threw the matches down, then went into his tent.

TOYS AREN'T US

IN THE LONDON OFFICE, Mrs. Jones sat waiting while Alan Blunt read the report. The sun was shining.

A pigeon was strutting back and forth along the ledge outside as if it were keeping guard.

“He’s doing very well,” Blunt said at last. “Remarkably well, in fact.” He turned a page. “I see he missed target practice.”

“Were you planning to give him a gun?” Mrs. Jones asked.

“No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Then why does he need target practice?”

Blunt raised an eyebrow. “We can’t give a teenager a gun,” he said. “On the other hand, I don’t think we can send him to Port Tallon empty-handed. You’d better have a word with Smithers.”

“I already have. He’s working on it now.”

Mrs. Jones stood up as if to leave. But at the door she hesitated. “I wonder if it’s occurred to you that Rider may have been preparing him for this all along?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Preparing Alex to replace him. Ever since the boy was old enough to walk, he’s been being trained for intelligence work ... but without knowing it. I mean, he’s lived abroad so he now speaks French, German, and Spanish. He’s been mountain climbing, diving, and skiing. He’s learned karate. Physically he’s in perfect shape.” She shrugged. “I think Rider wanted Alex to become a spy.”

“But not so soon,” Blunt said.

“I agree. You know as well as I do, Alan—he’s not ready yet. If we send him into Sayle Enterprises, he’s going to get himself killed.”

“Perhaps.” The single word was cold, matter-of-fact.

“He’s fourteen years old! We can’t do it.”

“We have to.” Blunt stood up and opened the window, letting in the air and the sound of the traffic. The pigeon hurled itself off the ledge, afraid of him. “This whole business worries me,” he said. “The prime minister sees the Stormbreakers as a major coup ... for himself and for his government. But there’s still something about Herod Sayle that I don’t like. Did you tell the boy about Yassen Gregorovich?”

“No.” Mrs. Jones shook her head.

“Then it’s time you did. It was Yassen who killed his uncle. I’m sure of it. And if Yassen was working for Sayle...”

“What will you do if Yassen kills Alex Rider?”

“That’s not our problem, Mrs. Jones. If the boy gets himself killed, at least it will be the final proof

that there is something wrong. At the very least it'll allow me to postpone the Stormbreaker project and take a good hard look at what's going on at Port Tallon. In a way, it would almost help us if he was killed."

"The boy's not ready yet. He'll make mistakes. It won't take them long to find out who he is." Mrs. Jones sighed. "I don't think Alex has got much chance at all."

"I agree." Blunt turned back from the window. The sun slanted over his shoulder. A single shadow fell across his face. "But it's too late to worry about that now," he said. "We have no more time. Stop the training now. Send him in."

Alex sat hunched up in the back of the low-flying C-130 military aircraft, his stomach churning behind his knees. There were eleven men sitting in two lines around him—his own unit and two others. For an hour now, the plane had been flying at just three hundred feet, following the Welsh valleys, dipping and swerving to avoid the mountain peaks. A single bulb glowed red behind a wire mesh, adding to the heat in the cramped cabin. Alex could feel the engines vibrating through him. It was like traveling in a spin dryer and microwave oven combined.

The thought of jumping out of a plane with an oversize silk umbrella would have made Alex sick with fear

—but only that morning he'd been told that he wouldn't in fact be jumping. A message from London. They couldn't risk him breaking a leg, it said, and Alex guessed that the end of his training was near. Even so, he'd been taught how to pack a parachute, how to control it, how to exit a plane, and how to land. And at the end of the day the sergeant had instructed him to join the flight—just for the experience. Now, close to the drop zone, Alex felt almost disappointed. He'd watch everyone else jump and then he'd be left alone.

"P minus five..."

The voice of the pilot came over the speaker system, distant and metallic. Alex gritted his teeth. Five minutes until the jump. He looked at the other men, shuffling into position, checking the cords that connected them to the static line. He was sitting next to Wolf. To his surprise, the man was completely quiet, unmoving. It was hard to tell in the half darkness, but the look on his face could almost have been fear.

There was a loud buzz and the red light turned green. The assistant pilot had climbed through from the cockpit. He reached for a handle and pulled open a door set in the back of the aircraft, allowing the cold air to rush in. Alex could see a single square of night. It was raining. The rain howled past.

The green light began to flash. The assistant pilot tapped the first pair on their shoulders and Alex watched them shuffle over to the side and then throw themselves out. For a moment they were there, frozen in the doorway. Then they were gone like a photograph crumpled and spun away by the wind. Two more men followed. Then another two. Wolf would be the last to leave—and with Alex not jumping he would be on his own.

It took less than a minute. Suddenly Alex was aware that only he and Wolf were left.

"Move it!" the assistant pilot shouted above the roar of the engines.

Wolf picked himself up. His eyes briefly met Alex's and in that moment Alex knew. Wolf was a popular leader. He was tough and he was fast—completing a thirty-mile hike as if it were just a stroll

in a park. But he had a weak spot. Somehow he'd allowed this parachute jump to get to him and he was too scared to move. It was hard to believe, but there he was, frozen in the doorway, his arms rigid, staring out. Alex glanced back. The assistant pilot was looking the other way. He hadn't seen what was happening. And when he did? If Wolf failed to make the jump, it would be the end of his training and maybe even the end of his career. Even hesitating would be bad enough. He'd be binned.

Alex thought for a moment. Wolf hadn't moved. Alex could see his shoulders rising and falling as he tried to summon up the courage to go. Ten seconds had passed. Maybe more. The assistant pilot was leaning down, stowing away a piece of equipment. Alex stood up. "Wolf..." he said.

Wolf didn't hear him.

Alex took one last quick look at the assistant pilot, then kicked out with all his strength. His foot slammed into Wolf's backside. He'd put all his strength behind it. Wolf was caught by surprise, his hands coming free as he plunged into the swirling night air.

The assistant pilot turned around and saw Alex. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

"Just stretching my legs," Alex shouted back.

The plane curved in the air and began the journey home.

Mrs. Jones was waiting for him when he walked into the hangar. She was sitting at a table, wearing a gray silk jacket and trousers with a black handkerchief flowing out of her top pocket. For a moment she didn't recognize him. Alex was dressed in a flying suit. His hair was damp from the rain. His face was pinched with tiredness, and he seemed to have grown older over the past two weeks. None of the men had arrived back yet. A truck had been sent to collect them from a field about two miles away.

"Alex..." she said.

Alex looked at her but said nothing.

"It was my decision to stop you from jumping," she said. "I hope you're not disappointed. I just thought it was too much of a risk. Please. Sit down."

Alex sat down opposite her.

"I have something that might cheer you up," she went on. "I've brought you some toys."

"I'm too old for toys," Alex said.

"Not these toys."

She signaled and a man appeared, walking out of the shadows, carrying a tray of equipment that he set down on the table. The man was enormously fat. When he sat down, the metal chair disappeared beneath the spread of his buttocks, and Alex was surprised it could even take his weight. He was bald with a black mustache and several chins, each one melting into the next and finally into his neck and shoulders. He wore a pinstriped suit, which must have used enough material to make a tent.

"Smithers," he said, nodding at Alex. "Very nice to meet you, old chap."

"What have you got for him?" Mrs. Jones demanded.

"I'm afraid we haven't had a great deal of time, Mrs. J," Smithers replied. "The challenge was to think what a fourteen-year-old might carry with him—and adapt it." He picked the first object off the

tray. A yo-yo. It was slightly larger than normal, black plastic. "Let's start with this," Smithers said.

Alex shook his head. He couldn't believe any of this. "Don't tell me," he exclaimed, "it's some sort of secret weapon..."

"Not exactly. I was told you weren't to have weapons. You're too young."

"So it's not really a hand grenade? Pull the string and run like hell?"

"Certainly not. It's a yo-yo." Smithers pulled out the string, holding it between a pudgy finger and thumb.

"However, the string is a special sort of nylon. Very advanced. There's thirty yards of it and it can lift weights of up to two hundred pounds. The actual yoyo is motorized and clips onto your belt. Very useful for climbing."

"Amazing." Alex was unimpressed.

"And then there's this." Mr. Smithers produced a small tube. Alex read the side: ZIT-CLEAN. FOR HEALTHIER SKIN. "Nothing personal," Smithers went on, apologetically. "But we thought it was something a boy of your age might carry. And it is rather remarkable." He opened the tube and squeezed some of the cream onto his finger. "Completely harmless when you touch it. But bring it into contact with metal and it's quite another story." He wiped his finger, smearing the cream onto the surface of the table.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a wisp of acrid smoke twisted upward in the air, the metal sizzled, and a jagged hole appeared. "It'll do that to just about any metal," Smithers explained. "Very useful if you need to break through a lock." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his finger clean.

"Anything else?" Mrs. Jones asked.

"Oh yes, Mrs. J. You could say this is our *pièce de résistance*." He picked up a brightly colored box that Alex recognized at once as a Nintendo Color Game Boy. "What teenager would be complete without one of these?" he asked. "This one comes with four games. And the beauty of it is, each cartridge turns the computer into something quite different."

He showed Alex the first game. Nemesis. "If you insert this one, the computer becomes a fax/photocopier, which gives you direct contact with us and vice versa. Just pass the screen across any page you want to transmit and we'll have it in seconds."

He produced a second game: Exocet. "This one turns the computer into an X-ray device. Place the machine against any solid surface less than two inches thick and watch the screen. It has an audio function too. You just have to plug in the earphones. Useful for eavesdropping. It's not as powerful as I'd like, but we're working on it."

The third game was called Speed Wars. "This one's a bug finder," Smithers explained. "You can use the computer to sweep a room and check if somebody's trying to listen in on you. I suggest you use it the moment you arrive. And finally ... my own favorite."

Smithers held up a final cartridge. It was labeled BOMBER BOY.

"Do I get to play this one?" Alex asked.

"You can play all four of them. They all have a built in games function. But as the name might suggest,

this is actually a smoke bomb. This time the cartridge doesn't go into the machine. You leave it somewhere in a room and press START three times on the console, and the bomb will be set off by remote control. Useful camouflage if you need to escape in a hurry."

"Thank you, Smithers," Mrs. Jones said.

"My pleasure, Mrs. J." Smithers stood up, his legs straining to take the huge weight. "I'll hope to see you again, Alex. I've never had to equip a boy before. I'm sure I'll be able to think up a whole host of quite delightful ideas."

He waddled off and disappeared through a door that clanged shut behind him.

Mrs. Jones turned to Alex. "You leave tomorrow for Port Tallon," she said. "You'll be going under the name of Felix Lester." She handed him an envelope. "The real Felix Lester left for Florida yesterday. You'll find everything you need to know about him in here."

"I'll read it in bed."

"Good." Suddenly she was serious and Alex found himself wondering if she was herself a mother. If so, she could well have a son his age. She took out a black-and-white photograph and laid it on the table. It showed a man in a white T shirt and jeans. He was in his late twenties with light, close-cropped hair, a smooth face, the body of a dancer. The photograph was slightly blurred. It had been taken from a distance, possibly with a hidden camera. "I want you to look at this," she said.

"I'm looking."

"His name is Yassen Gregorovich. He was born in Russia, but he now works for many countries. Iraq has employed him. Also Serbia, Libya, and China."

"What does he do?" Alex asked.

"He's a contract killer, Alex. We believe it was he who killed Ian Rider."

There was a long pause. Alex had almost managed to persuade himself that this whole business was just some sort of crazy adventure ... a game. But looking at the cold face with its blank, hooded eyes, he felt something stirring inside him and knew it was fear. He remembered his uncle's car, shattered by bullets. A man like this, a contract killer, would do the same to him. He wouldn't even blink.

"This photograph was taken six months ago, in Cuba," Mrs. Jones was saying. "It may have been a coincidence, but Herod Sayle was there at the same time. The two of them may have met. And there is something else." She paused. "Rider used a code in the last message he sent. A single letter. Y."

"Y for Yassen."

"He must have seen Yassen somewhere in Port Tallon. He wanted us to know..."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Alex asked. His mouth had gone dry.

"Because if you see him, if Yassen is anywhere near Sayle Enterprises, I want you to contact us at once."

"And then?"

"We'll pull you out. It doesn't matter how old you are, Alex. If Yassen finds out you're working for us, he'll kill you too."

She took the photograph back. Alex stood up.

“You’ll leave here tomorrow morning at eight o’clock,” Mrs. Jones said. “Be careful, Alex. And good luck.”

Alex walked across the hangar, his footsteps echoing. Behind him, Mrs. Jones unwrapped a peppermint and slipped it into her mouth. Her breath always smelled faintly of mint. As head of Special Operations, how many men had she sent to their deaths? Ian Rider and maybe dozens more. Perhaps it was easier for her if her breath was sweet.

There was a movement ahead of him and he saw that the parachutists had gotten back from their jump.

They were walking toward him out of the darkness with Wolf and the other men from K Unit right at the front. Alex tried to step around them, but he found Wolf blocking his way.

“You’re leaving,” Wolf said. Somehow he must have heard that Alex’s training was over.

“Yes.”

There was a long pause. “What happened on the plane...” he began.

“Forget it, Wolf,” Alex said. “Nothing happened. You jumped and I didn’t. That’s all.”

Wolf held out a hand. “I want you to know ... I was wrong about you. You’re all right. And maybe ... one day it would be good to work with you.”

“You never know,” Alex said.

They shook.

“Good luck, Cub.”

“Good-bye, Wolf.”

Alex walked out into the night.

PHYSALIA PHYSALIA

THE SILVER GRAY Mercedes S600 cruised down the freeway, traveling south. Alex was sitting in the front passenger seat with so much soft leather around him that he could barely hear the 389 horsepower, 6-liter engine that was carrying him toward the Sayle complex near Port Tallon, Cornwall. At eighty miles per hour, the engine was only idling. But Alex could feel the power of the car. One hundred thousand pounds worth of German engineering. One touch from the unsmiling chauffeur and the Mercedes would leap forward. This was a car that sneered at speed limits.

Alex had been collected that morning from a converted church in Hampstead, North London. This was where Felix Lester lived. When the driver had arrived, Alex had been waiting with his luggage, and there was even a woman he had never met before—an M16 operative—kissing him, telling him to brush his teeth, waving goodbye. As far as the driver was concerned, Alex was Felix. That morning Alex had read through the file and knew that Lester went to a school called St. Anthony's, had two sisters and a pet Labrador. His father was an architect. His mother designed jewelry. A happy family—his family if anybody asked.

“How far is it to Port Tallon?” he asked.

So far the driver had barely spoken a word. He answered Alex without looking at him. “A few hours. You want some music?”

“Got any John Lennon CDs?” That wasn't his choice. According to the file, Felix Lester liked John Lennon.

“No.”

“Forget it. I'll get some sleep.”

He needed the sleep. He was still exhausted from the training and wondered how he would explain all the halfhealed cuts and bruises if anyone saw under his shirt. Maybe he'd tell them he got bullied at school. He closed his eyes and allowed the leather to suck him into sleep.

It was the feeling of the car slowing down that awoke him. He opened his eyes and saw a fishing village, the blue sea beyond, a swath of rolling green hills, and a cloudless sky. It was a picture off a jigsaw puzzle, or perhaps a holiday brochure advertising a forgotten England. Seagulls swooped and cried overhead. An old tugboat—tangled nets, smoke, and flaking paint—pulled into the quay. A few locals, fishermen and their wives, stood around, watching. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon and the village was caught in the silvery light that comes at the end of a perfect spring day.

“Port Tallon,” the driver said. He must have noticed Alex opening his eyes.

“It's pretty.”

“Not if you're a fish.”

They drove around the edge of the village and back inland, down a lane that twisted between strangely bumpy fields. Alex saw the ruins of buildings, half-crumbling chimneys, and rusting metal wheels and knew that he was looking at an old tin mine. They'd mined tin in Cornwall for three thousand years until one day the tin had run out. Now all that was left was the holes.

About another mile down the lane a metal fence sprang up. It was brand-new, twenty feet high, topped with razor wire. Arc lamps on scaffolding towers stood at regular intervals and there were huge signs, red on white. You could have read them from the next county:

SAYLE ENTERPRISES

Strictly Private

“Trespassers will be shot,” Alex muttered to himself. He remembered what Mrs. Jones had told him. “He’s more or less formed his own private army. He’s acting as if he’s got something to hide.” Well, that was certainly his own first impression. The whole complex was somehow shocking, alien to the sloping hills and fields.

The car reached the main gate, where there was a security cabin and an electronic barrier. A guard in a blue-and-gray uniform with SE printed on his jacket waved them through. The barrier lifted automatically.

And then they were following a long, straight road over a stretch of land that had somehow been hammered flat with an airstrip on one side and a cluster of four high tech buildings on the other. The buildings were large, smoked glass and steel, each one joined to the next by a covered walkway. There were two aircraft next to the landing strip. A helicopter and a small cargo plane. Alex was impressed. The whole complex must have been a couple of miles square. It was quite an operation.

The Mercedes came to a roundabout with a fountain at the center, swept around it, and continued up toward a fantastic sprawling house. It was Victorian, redbrick topped with copper domes and spires that had long ago turned green. There must have been at least a hundred windows on five floors facing the drive. It was a house that just didn’t know when to stop.

The Mercedes pulled up in the front and the driver got out. “Follow me.”

“What about my luggage?” Alex asked.

“It’ll be brought.”

Alex and the driver went through the front door and into a hall dominated by a huge canvas—Judgment Day, the end of the world painted four centuries ago as a swirling mass of doomed souls and demons.

There were artworks everywhere. Watercolors and oils, prints, drawings, sculptures in stone and bronze, all crowded together with nowhere for the eye to rest. Alex followed the driver along a carpet so thick that he almost bounced. He was beginning to feel claustrophobic and he was relieved when they passed through a door and into a vast, cathedral-like room that was practically bare.

“Mr. Sayle will be here shortly,” the driver said, and left.

Alex looked around him. This was a modern room with a curving steel desk near the center, carefully positioned halogen lights, and a spiral staircase leading down from a perfect circle cut in the ceiling about fifteen feet high. One entire wall was covered with a single sheet of glass, and walking over to it, Alex realized that he was looking at a gigantic aquarium. The sheer size of the thing drew him toward it. It was hard to imagine how many thousands of gallons of water the glass held back, but he was surprised to see that the tank was empty. There were no fish, although it was big enough to hold a shark.

And then something moved in the turquoise shadows and Alex gasped with a mixture of horror and wonderment as the biggest jellyfish he had ever seen drifted into view. The main body of the creature was a shimmering, pulsating mass of white and mauve, shaped roughly like a cone. Beneath it, a mass of tentacles covered with circular stingers twisted in the water, at least ten feet long. As the jellyfish moved, or drifted in the artificial current, its tentacles writhed against the glass so that it looked almost as if it was trying to break out. It was the single most awesome and repulsive thing Alex had ever seen.

“Physalia physalia.” The voice came from behind him and Alex twisted around to see a man coming down the last of the stairs.

Herod Sayle was short. He was so short that Alex’s first impression was that he was looking at a reflection that had somehow been distorted. In his immaculate and expensive black suit with gold signet ring and brightly polished black shoes, he looked like a scaled-down model of a multimillionaire businessman. His skin was dark and his teeth flashed when he smiled. He had a round, bald head and very horrible eyes.

The gray pupils were too small, surrounded on all sides by white. Alex was reminded of tadpoles before they hatch. When Sayle stood next to him, the eyes were at the same level as his and held less warmth than the jellyfish.

“The Portuguese man-of-war,” Sayle continued. He had a heavy accent brought with him from the Cairo marketplace. “It’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t keep one as a pet,” Alex said.

“I came upon this one when I was diving in the South China Sea.” Sayle gestured at a glass display case and Alex noticed three harpoon guns and a collection of knives resting in velvet slots. “I love to kill fish,”

Sayle went on. “But when I saw this specimen of *Physalia physalia*, I knew I had to capture it and keep it.

You see, it reminds me of myself.”

“It’s ninety-nine percent water. It has no brain, no guts, and no anus.” Alex had dredged up the facts from somewhere and spoken them before he knew what he was doing.

Sayle glanced briefly at him, then turned back to the creature hovering over him in its tank. “It’s an outsider,” he said. “It drifts on its own, ignored by the other fish. It is silent and yet it demands respect.

You see the nematocysts, Mr. Lester? The stinging cells? If you were to find yourself wrapped in there, it would be an unforgettable death.”

“Call me Alex,” Alex said.

He’d meant to say Felix, but somehow it had slipped out. It was the most stupid, the most amateurish mistake he could have made. But he had been thrown by the way Sayle had appeared and by the slow, hypnotic dance of the jellyfish. The gray eyes squirmed. “I thought your name was Felix.”

“My friends call me Alex.”

“Why?”

“After Alex Ferguson. He’s the manager of my favorite soccer team.” It was the first thing Alex could think of. But he’d seen a soccer poster in Felix Lester’s bedroom and knew that at least he’d chosen the right team.

“Manchester United,” he added.

Sayle smiled. “That’s most amusing. Alex it shall be. And I hope we will be friends, Alex. You are a very lucky boy. You won the competition and you are going to be the first teenager to try out my Stormbreaker.

But this is also lucky, I think, for me. I want to know what you think of it! I want you to tell me what you like ... what you don’t.” The eyes dipped away and suddenly he was businesslike. “We have only three days until the launch,” he said. “We’d better get a bliddy move on, as my father used to say. I’ll have my man take you to our room and tomorrow morning, first thing, you must get to work. There’s a math program you should try ... also languages. All the software was developed here at Sayle Enterprises. Of course we’ve talked to children. We’ve gone to teachers, to education experts. But you, my dear ... Alex.

You will be worth more to me than all of them put together.”

As he had talked, Sayle had become more and more animated, carried away by his own enthusiasm. He had become a completely different man. Alex had to admit that he’d taken an immediate dislike to Herod Sayle. No wonder Blunt and the people at M16 had mistrusted him! But now he was forced to think again.

He was standing opposite one of the richest men in England, a man who had decided out of the goodness of his heart to give a huge gift to English schools. Just because he was small and slimy, that didn’t necessarily make him an enemy. Perhaps Blunt was wrong after all.

“Ah! Here’s my man now,” Sayle said. “And about bliddy time!”

The door had opened and a man had come in, dressed in the black suit and tails of an old-fashioned butler.

He was as tall and thin as his master was short and round, with a thatch of close-cropped ginger hair on top of a face that was so pale it was almost paper white. From a distance it had looked as if he was smiling, but as he drew closer, Alex gasped. The man had two horrendous scars, one on each side of his mouth, twisting up all the way to his ears. It was as if someone had at some time attempted to cut his face in half.

The scars were a gruesome shade of mauve. There were smaller, fainter scars where at one time his cheeks had been stitched.

“This is Mr. Grin,” Sayle said. “He changed his name after his accident.”

“Accident?” Alex found it hard not to stare at the terrible wound.

“Mr. Grin used to work in a circus. It was a novelty knife-throwing act. For the climax he used to catch a spinning knife between his teeth. But then one night his elderly mother came to see the show. She waved to him from the front row and he got his timing wrong. He’s worked for me now for a dozen years and although his appearance may be displeasing, he is loyal and efficient. Don’t try to

talk to him, by the way.

He has no tongue.”

“Eeeurgh!” Mr. Grin said.

“Nice to meet you,” Alex muttered.

“Take him to the blue room,” Sayle commanded. He turned to Alex. “You’re fortunate that one of our nicest rooms has come up free—here, in the house. We had a security man staying there. But he left us quite suddenly.”

“Oh? Why was that?” Alex asked, casually.

“I have no idea. One moment he was here, the next he was gone.” Sayle smiled again. “I hope you won’t do the same, Alex.”

“Thi ... wurgh!” Mr. Grin gestured at the door, and leaving Herod Sayle standing in front of his huge captive, Alex left the room.

He was led back along a passage, past more works of art, up a staircase, and then along a wide corridor with thick wood-paneled doors and chandeliers. Alex assumed that the main house was used for entertaining. Sayle himself must live here. But the computers would be constructed in the modern buildings he had seen opposite the airstrip. Presumably he would be taken there tomorrow.

His room was at the far end. It was a large room with a four-poster bed and a window looking out onto the fountain. Darkness had fallen and the water, cascading ten feet into the air over a semi-naked statue that looked remarkably like Herod Sayle, was eerily illuminated by a dozen concealed lights. Next to the window was a table with an evening meal already laid out for him: ham, cheese, salad. His luggage was lying on the bed.

He went over to his case—a Nike sports bag—and examined it. When he had closed it up, he had inserted three hairs into the zip, trapping them in the metal teeth. They were no longer there. Alex opened the case and went through it. Everything was exactly as it had been when he had packed, but he was certain that the sports bag had been expertly and methodically searched.

He took out the Color Game Boy, inserted the Speed Wars cartridge, and pressed the start button. At once the screen lit up with a green rectangle, the same shape as the room. He lifted the Game Boy up and swung it around him, following the line of the walls. A red flashing dot suddenly appeared on the screen. He walked forward, holding the Game Boy in front of him.

The dot flashed faster, more intensely. He had reached a picture, hanging next to the bathroom, a squiggle of colors that looked suspiciously like a Picasso. He put the Game Boy down, and being careful not to make a sound, lifted the canvas off the wall. The bug was taped behind it, a black disk about the size of a dime.

Alex looked at it for a minute wondering why it was there. Security? Or was Sayle such a control freak that he had to know what his guests were doing, every minute of the day and night?

Alex lifted the picture and gently lowered it back into place. There was only one bug in the room. The bathroom was clean.

He ate his dinner, showered, and went to bed. As he passed the window, he noticed activity in the

grounds near the fountains. There were lights coming out of the modern buildings. Three men, all dressed in white overalls, were driving toward the house in an open-top jeep. Two more men walked past. These were security guards, dressed in the same uniforms as the men at the gate. They were both carrying semiautomatic machine guns. Not just a private army but a well-armed one.

He got into bed. The last person who had slept here had been his uncle, Ian Rider. Had he seen something, looking out of the window? Had he heard something? What could have happened that meant he had to die?

Sleep took a long time coming to the dead man's bed.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

ALEX SAW IT the moment he opened his eyes. It would have been obvious to anyone who slept in the bed, but, of course, nobody had slept there since Ian Rider had been killed. It was a triangle of white slipped into a fold in the canopy above the four-poster bed. You had to be lying on your back to see it—like Alex was now.

It was out of his reach. He had to balance a chair on the mattress and then stand on the chair to reach it.

Wobbling, almost falling, he finally managed to trap it between his fingers and pull it out. It was a square of paper, folded twice. Someone had drawn on it, a strange design with what looked like a reference number beneath it:

There wasn't very much of it, but Alex recognized Ian Rider's handwriting. What did it mean? He pulled on some clothes, went over to the table, and took out a sheet of plain paper. Quickly, he wrote a brief message in block capitals:

FOUND THIS IN IAN RIDERS ROOM. CAN YOU MAKE ANY SENSE OF IT?

Then he found his Game Boy, inserted the Nemesis cartridge into the back, turned it on, and passed the screen over the two sheets of paper, scanning first his message and then the design. Instantaneously, he knew, a machine would have clicked on in Mrs. Jones's office in London and a copy of the two pages would have scrolled out of the back. Maybe she could work it out. She was, after all, meant to work for Intelligence.

Finally, Alex turned off the machine, then removed the back and hid the folded paper in the battery compartment. The diagram had to be important. Ian Rider had hidden it. Maybe it was what had cost him his life.

There was a knock at the door. Alex went over and opened it. Mr. Grin was standing outside, still wearing his butler costume.

"Good morning," Alex said.

"Geurgh!" Mr. Grin gestured and Alex followed him back down the corridor and out of the house. He felt relieved to be out in the air, away from all the oppressive artworks. As they paused in front of the fountains there was a sudden roar and a propeller-driven cargo plane dipped down over the roof of the house and landed on the runway.

"If gring gy," Mr. Grin explained.

"Just what I thought," Alex said.

They reached the first of the modern buildings and Mr. Grin pressed his hand against a glass plate next to the door. There was a green glow as his fingerprints were read, and a moment later, the door slid soundlessly open.

Everything was different on the other side of the door. From the art and elegance of the main house, Alex could have stepped into the next century. Long white corridors with metallic floors. Halogen lights. The unnatural chill of air-conditioning. Another world.

A woman was waiting for them, broad-shouldered and severe, her blond hair twisted into the tightest of buns. She had a strangely blank, moon-shaped face, wire-framed spectacles, and no makeup apart from a smear of yellow lipstick. She wore a white coat with a name tag pinned to the top pocket. It read: VOLE.

“You must be Felix,” she said. “Or is it now, I understand, Alex? Yes! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Fraulein Vole.” She had a thick German accent. “You may call me Nadia.” She glanced at Mr. Grin. “I will take him from here.”

Mr. Grin nodded and left the building.

“This way.” Vole began to walk. “We have four blocks here. Block A, where we are now, is administration and recreation. Block B is software development. Block C is research and storage. Block D is where the main Stormbreaker assembly line is found.”

“Where’s breakfast?” Alex asked.

“You have not eaten? I will send you a sandwich. Herr Sayle is very keen for you to begin at once with the experience.”

She walked like a soldier—straight back, her feet, in tight black leather shoes, rapping against the floor.

Alex followed her through another door and into a bare square room with a chair and a desk and, on the desk, the first Stormbreaker he had ever seen.

It was a beautiful machine. iMac might have been the first computer with a real sense of design, but the Stormbreaker had far surpassed it. It was black apart from the white lightning bolt down the side—and the screen could have been a porthole into outer space. Alex sat behind the desk and turned it on. The computer booted itself instantly. A second fork of animated lightning sliced across the screen, there was a swirl of clouds, and then in burning red the letters SE, the logo of Sayle Enterprises. Seconds later, the desktop appeared with icons for math, science, French—every subject—ready for access. Even in those brief seconds, Alex could feel the speed and the power of the computer. And Herod Sayle was going to put one in every school in the country! He had to admire the man. It was an incredible gift.

“I leave you here,” Fraulein Vole said. “It is better for you, I think, to explore the Stormbreaker on your own. Tonight you will have dinner with Herr Sayle and you will tell him your feeling.”

“Yeah—I’ll tell him my feeling.”

“I will have the sandwich sent in to you. But I must ask you please not leave the room. There is, you understand, the security.”

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Vole,” Alex said.

The woman left. Alex opened one of the programs and for the next three hours lost himself in the state-of-the-art software of the Stormbreaker. Even when his sandwich arrived, he ignored it, letting it curl on the plate. He would never have said that schoolwork was fun, but he had to admit that the computer made it lively. The history program brought the battle of Port Stanley to life with music and video clips. How to extract oxygen from water? The science program did it in front of his eyes. The Stormbreaker even managed to make algebra almost bearable, which was more than Mr. Donovan at

Brookland had ever done.

The next time Alex looked at his watch it was one o'clock. He had been in the room for over four hours. He stretched and stood up. Nadia Vole had told him not to leave, but if there were any secrets to be found in Sayle Enterprises, he wasn't going to find them here. He walked over to the door and was surprised to find that it opened as he approached. He went out, into the corridor. There was nobody in sight. Time to move.

Block A was administration and recreation. Alex passed a number of offices, then a blank, white-tiled cafeteria. There were about forty men and women, all in white coats and identity tags, sitting and talking animatedly over their lunches. He had chosen a good time. Nobody passed him as he continued through a Plexiglas walkway into Block B. There were computer screens everywhere, glowing in cramped offices piled high with papers and printouts. Software development.

Through to Block C—research—past a library with endless shelves of books and CD-ROMs. Alex ducked behind a shelf as two technicians walked past, talking together. He was out-of-bounds, on his own, snooping around without any idea of what he was looking for. Trouble, probably. What else could there be to find?

He walked softly, casually, down the corridor, heading for the last block. A murmur of voices reached him and he quickly stepped into an alcove, squatting beside a drinking fountain as two men and a woman walked past, all wearing white coats, arguing about Web servers. Overhead, he noticed a security camera swiveling toward him. He made himself as small as he could, crouching down behind the fountain. The three technicians left the room. The security camera swung away again and he darted forward, keeping well clear of the wide-angle lens.

Had it seen him? Alex couldn't be sure, but he did know one thing. He was running out of time. Maybe the Vole woman would have checked up on him already. Maybe someone would have brought lunch to the empty room. If he was going to find anything, it would have to be soon.

He started along the glass passage that joined Block C to Block D and here at last there was something different. The corridor was split in half with a metal stair case leading down into what must be some sort of basement. And although every building and every door he had seen so far had been labeled, this staircase was blank. The light stopped about halfway down. It was almost as if the stairs were trying not to get themselves noticed.

The clang of feet on metal. Alex backtracked to the first door he could find. Fortunately, it opened into a storage closet. He hid inside, watching through the rack as Mr. Grin appeared, rising out of the ground like a vampire on a bad day. As the sun hit his dead white face, his scars twitched and he blinked several times before walking off into Block D.

What had he been doing? Where did the stairs go?

Alex slipped off his shoes and, carrying them in his hand, hurried down. His feet made no sound on the metal steps. It was like stepping into a morgue. The air-conditioning was so strong that he could feel it on his forehead and on the palms of his hands, fast-freezing his sweat.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and put his shoes back on. He was in another long passageway, stretching back under the complex, the way he had come. It led to a single metal door. But there was something very strange. The walls of the passage were unfinished dark brown rock with streaks of what looked zinc or some other metal. The floor was also rough and the way was lit by old-fashioned

bulbs, hanging on wires. It all reminded him of something ... something had very recently seen. But he couldn't remember what.

Somehow Alex knew that the door at the end of the passage would be locked. It looked as if it had been locked forever. Like the stairs it was unlabeled. And it seemed somehow too small to be important. But Mr. Grin had just come up the stairs. There was only one place he could have come from and that was the other side. The door had to go somewhere!

He reached it and tried the handle. It wouldn't move. He pressed his ear against the metal and listened.

Nothing, unless ... was he imagining it? ... a sort of throbbing. A pump or something like it. Alex would have given anything to see through the metal. And suddenly he realized that he could—the Game Boy was in his pocket. So were the four cartridges. He took out the one called Exocet. X for X ray, he reminded himself. Now ... how did it work? He flicked it on and held it flat against the door, the screen facing him.

To his amazement, the screen flickered into life; a tiny, almost opaque window through the metal door.

Alex was looking into a large room. There was something tall and barrel shaped in the middle of it. And there were people. Ghostlike, mere smudges on the computer screen, they were moving back and forth.

Some of them were carrying objects—flat and rectangular. Trays of some sort? There seemed to be a desk to one side, piled with apparatus that he couldn't make out. Alex pressed the brightness control, trying to zoom in. But the room was too big. Everything was too far away.

But Smithers had also built an audio function into the machine. Alex fumbled in his pocket and took out the set of earphones. Still holding the Game Boy against the door, he pressed the wire into the socket and slipped the earphones over his head. If he couldn't see, at least he might be able to hear, and sure enough the voices came through, faint and disconnected—but audible through the powerful speaker system built into the machine.

“...place. We have twenty-four hours.”

“It's not enough.”

“It's all we have. They come in tonight. At o'two hundred.”

Alex didn't recognize any of the voices. Amplified by the tiny machine, they sounded like a telephone call from abroad on a very bad line.

“...Grin ... overseeing the delivery.”

“It's still not enough time.”

And then they were gone. Alex tried to piece together what he had heard. Something was being delivered.

Two hours after midnight. Mr. Grin was arranging the delivery.

But what? Why?

He had just turned off the Game Boy and put it back into his pocket when he heard the scunch of

gravel behind him that told him he was no longer alone. He turned around and found himself facing Nadia Vole.

Alex realized that she had tried to sneak up on him. She had known he was down here.

“What are you doing, Alex?” she asked. Her voice was poisoned honey.

“Nothing,” Alex said.

“I asked you to stay in your room.”

“Yes. But I’d been there all day. I needed a break.”

“And you came down here?”

“I saw the stairs. I thought, they might lead to the toilet.”

There was a long silence. Behind him, Alex could still hear—or feel—the throbbing from the secret room.

Then the woman nodded as if she had decided to accept his story. “There is nothing down here,” she said.

“This door leads only to the generator room. Please...” She gestured. “I will take you back to the main house and later you must prepare for dinner with Herr Sayle. He wishes to know your first impressions of the Stormbreaker.”

Alex walked past her and back up the stairs. He was certain of two things. The first was that Nadia Vole was lying. This was no generator room. She was hiding something—from him and perhaps also from Herod Sayle. And she hadn’t believed him either. One of the cameras must have spotted him and she had been sent here to find him. So she knew that he was lying to her.

Not a good start.

Alex reached the staircase and climbed up into the light, feeling the woman’s eyes, like daggers, stabbing into his back.

NIGHT VISITORS

HEROD SAYLE WAS playing snooker when Alex was shown back into the room with the jellyfish. It was hard to say quite where the heavy wooden snooker table had come from, but Alex couldn't avoid the feeling that the little man looked slightly ridiculous, almost lost at the far end of the green baize. Mr. Grin was with him, carrying a footstool, which Sayle stood on for each shot.

"Ah ... good evening, Felix. Or, of course, I mean Alex!" Sayle exclaimed. "Do you play snooker?"

"Occasionally."

"How would you like to play against me?" He gestured at the table. "There are only two red balls left

—
then the colors. I'm sure you know the rules. The black ball is worth seven points, the pink six, and so on.

But I'm willing to bet that you don't manage to score at all."

"How much?"

"Ha ha!" Sayle laughed. "Suppose I were to bet you ten pounds a ball?"

"As much as that?" Alex looked surprised.

"To a man like myself, ten pounds is nothing. Nothing! Why, I could quite happily bet you a hundred pounds a point!"

"Then why don't you?" The words were softly spoken, but they were still a direct challenge.

"A hundred pounds?" Sayle gazed thoughtfully at Alex. "But how will you pay me back if you lose?" Alex said nothing and Sayle laughed. "You can work for me after you leave school," he said. "A hundred pounds a point if you get them in. A hundred hours working for me if you don't. What do you say?"

Alex nodded, feeling suddenly sick. Adding up the balls, he could see that there were twenty-four points left on the table. Two thousand four hundred hours working for Herod Sayle! That would take years.

"Very well." Sayle was still smiling. "I like a gamble. My father was a gambling man."

"I thought he was an oral hygienist."

"Who told you that?"

Silently, Alex cursed himself. Why wasn't he more careful when he was with this man? "I read it in a paper," he said. "My dad got me some stuff to read about you when I won the competition."

"Very well, let's get on with it." Sayle decided to take the first shot without asking Alex. He hit the cue ball, sending one of the reds straight into the middle pocket. "That's a hundred hours you owe me. I think I'll get you started cleaning the toilets..."

The jellyfish floated past as if watching the game from its tank. Mr. Grin picked up the footstool and

moved it around the table. Sayle laughed briefly and followed the butler around, already sizing up the next shot, a fairly tricky black into the corner. Seven points if he got it in. Seven hundred hours more work! “So what does your father do?” Sayle asked.

Alex quickly remembered what he had read about Felix Lester’s family. “He’s an architect,” he said. “Oh yes? What’s he designed?” The question was casual, but Alex wondered if he was being tested.

“He was working on an office in Soho,” Alex said. “Before that he did an art gallery in Aberdeen.”

“Yes.” Sayle climbed onto the footstool and aimed. The black ball missed the corner pocket by a fraction of an inch, spinning back into the center. Sayle frowned. “That was your bliddy fault,” he snapped at Mr. Grin.

“Warg?”

“Your shadow was on the table. Never mind! Never mind!” He turned to Alex. “You’ve been unlucky.

None of the balls will go in. You won’t make any money this time.”

Alex pulled a cue out of the rack and glanced at the table. Sayle was right. The last red ball was too close to the cushion. But in snooker there are other ways to win points, as Alex knew only too well. There was a snooker table in the basement of the Chelsea house and he’d often spent evenings playing against his uncle.

This was something he hadn’t mentioned to Sayle. He aimed carefully at the red, then hit. Perfect.

“Nowhere near!” Sayle was back at the table before the balls had even stopped rolling. But he had spoken too soon. He stared as the white ball hit the cushion and rolled behind the pink. He was trapped—

snookered. It was impossible to hit the cue ball now without touching the pink. For about twenty seconds he measured up the angles, breathing through his nose. “You’ve had a bit of bliddy luck!” he said. “You seem to have accidentally snookered me. Now, let me see...” He concentrated, then hit the white, trying to curve it around. But once again he was out by less than half an inch. There was an audible click as it touched the pink.

“Foul shot,” Alex said. “You touched the pink. According to the rules, that’s six points to me.”

“What?”

“The foul is worth six points. I was down one point, so now I’m up five points. That’s five hundred pounds you owe me.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Saliva flecked Sayle’s lips. He was staring at the table as if he couldn’t believe what had happened.

His shot had exposed the red ball. It was an easy shot into the top corner and Alex took it without hesitating. “And another hundred makes six hundred,” he said. He moved down the table, brushing past Mr. Grin. Quickly Alex judged the angles. Yes ...

He got a perfect kiss on the black, sending it into the corner with the white spinning back for a good angle on the yellow. One thousand three hundred pounds plus another two hundred when he dropped the yellow immediately afterward. Sayle could only watch in disbelief as Alex pocketed the green,

the brown, the blue, and the pink in that order and then, down the full length of the table, the black.

“I make that four thousand pounds exactly,” Alex said. He put down the cue. “Thank you very much.”

Sayle’s face had gone the color of the last ball. “Four thousand...! I wouldn’t have gambled if I’d known you were this bliddy good,” he said. He went over to the wall and pressed a button. Part of the floor slid back and the entire billiard table disappeared into it, carried down by a hydraulic lift. When the floor slid back, there was no sign that it had ever been there. It was a neat trick. The toy of a man with money to burn.

But Sayle was no longer in a mood for games. He threw his billiard cue over to Mr. Grin, hurling it almost like a javelin. The butler’s hand flicked out and caught it. “Let’s eat,” Sayle said.

The two of them sat at opposite ends of a long glass table in the room next door while Mr. Grin served smoked salmon, then some sort of stew. Alex drank water. Sayle, who had cheered up once again, had a glass of expensive red wine.

“You spent some time with the Stormbreaker today?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And...?”

“It’s great,” Alex said, and meant it. He still found it hard to believe that this ridiculous man could have created anything so sleek and powerful.

“So what programs did you use?”

“History. Science. Math. It’s hard to believe, but I actually enjoyed them.”

“Do you have any criticisms?”

Alex thought for a moment. “I was surprised it didn’t have three-D acceleration.”

“It’s not intended for games.”

“Did you consider a headset and integrated microphone?”

“Of course.” Sayle nodded. “They’ll be available as accessories. I’m sorry you’ve only come here for such a short time, Alex. Tomorrow we’ll have to get you onto the Internet. The Stormbreakers are all connected to a master network. That’s controlled from here. It means they have twenty-four-hour free access.”

“That’s cool.”

“It’s more than cool.” Sayle’s eyes were far away, the gray pupils small, dancing. “Tomorrow we start shipping the computers out,” he said. “They’ll go by plane, by truck, and by boat. It will take just one day for them to reach every point of the country. And the day after, at twelve o’clock noon exactly, the prime minister honors me by pressing the start button that will bring every one of my Stormbreakers on-line. At that moment all the schools will be united. Think of it, Alex! Thousands of schoolchildren—hundreds of thousands—sitting in front of the screens, suddenly together. North, south, east, and west. One school. One family. And then they will know me for what I am!”

He picked up his glass and emptied it. “How is the goat?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“The stew. The meat is goat. It was a recipe of my mother’s.”

“She must have been an unusual woman.”

Herod Sayle held out his glass and Mr. Grin refilled it. He was gazing at Alex curiously. “You know,” he aid. “I have a strange feeling that you and I have met before.”

“I don’t think so.”

“But, yes. Your face is familiar to me. Mr. Grin? What do you think?”

The butler stood back with the wine. His dead white wad twisted around to look at Alex. “Eeeg Raargh!”

he ;aid.

“Yes, of course. You’re right!”

“Eeeg Raargh?” Alex asked.

“Ian Rider. The security man I mentioned. You look lot like him. Quite a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. I never met him.” Alex could feel the danger getting closer. “You told me he left suddenly.”

“Yes. He was sent here to keep an eye on things, but if you ask me he was never any bliddy good. Spent half his time in the village. In the port, the post office, the library. When he wasn’t snooping around here, that is. Of course, that’s something else you have in common. I understand Fraulein Vole found you today...” Sayle’s pupils crawled to the front of his eyes, trying to et closer to Alex. “You were off limits.”

“I got a bit lost.” Alex shrugged, trying to make light of it.

“Well, I hope you don’t go wandering again tonight. Security is very tight at the moment, and as you may have noticed, my men are all armed.”

“I didn’t think that was legal in England.”

“We have a special license. At any rate, Alex, I would advise you to go straight to your room after dinner.

And stay there. I would be inconsolable if you were accidentally shot and killed in the darkness. Although, of course, it would save me four thousand pounds.”

“Actually, I think you’ve forgotten the check—”

“You’ll have it tomorrow. Maybe we can have lunch together. Mr. Grin will be serving up one of my grandmother’s recipes.”

“More goat?”

“Dog.”

“You obviously had a family that loved animals.”

“Only the edible ones.” Sayle smiled. “And now I must wish you good night.”

At one-thirty in the morning, Alex's eyes blinked open and he was instantly awake.

He slipped out of bed and dressed quickly in his darkest clothes, then left the room. He was half surprised that the door was open and that the corridors seemed to be unmonitored. But this was, after all, Sayle's private house and any security would have been designed to stop people coming in, not leaving.

Sayle had warned him not to leave the house. But the voices behind the metal door had spoken of something arriving at two o'clock. Alex had to know what it was. What could be such a big secret that it had to arrive in the middle of the night?

He found his way into the kitchen and tiptoed past a stretch of gleaming silver surfaces and an oversize fridge. Let sleeping dogs lie, he thought to himself, remembering the dinner. There was a side door, fortunately with the key still in the lock. Alex turned it and let himself out. As a last-minute precaution, he locked the door and kept the key. Now at least he had a way back in.

It was a soft gray night with a half-moon forming a perfect D in the sky. D for what, Alex wondered.

Danger? Discovery? Or disaster? Only time would tell. He took two steps forward, then froze as a searchlight directed from a tower he hadn't even seen rolled past, inches away. At the same time he became aware of voices, and two guards walked slowly across the garden, patrolling the back of the house. They were both armed and Alex remembered what Sayle had said. An accidental shooting would save him four thousand pounds. And given the importance of the Stormbreakers, would anyone care just how accidental the shooting might have been?

He waited until the men had gone, then took the opposite direction, running along the side of the house, crouching low under the windows. He reached the corner and looked around. In the distance the airstrip was lit up and there were figures—more guards and technicians everywhere. One man he recognized, walking past the fountain toward a truck parked next to a couple of cars. He was tall and gangly, silhouetted against the lights, a black cutout. But Alex would have known Mr. Grin anywhere. "They come in tonight. At o'two hundred." Night visitors. And Mr. Grin was on his way to meet them.

The butler had almost reached the truck and Alex knew that if he waited any longer he would be too late.

Throwing caution to the wind, he left the cover of the house and ran out into the open, trying to stay low and hoping his dark clothes would keep him invisible. He was only fifty yards from the truck when Mr. Grin suddenly stopped and turned around as if he had sensed there was someone there. There was nowhere for Alex to hide. He did the only thing he could and threw himself flat on the ground, burying his face in the grass. He counted slowly to five, then looked up. Mr. Grin was turning once again. A second figure had appeared—Nadia Vole. It seemed she would be driving. She muttered something as she climbed into the front. Mr. Grin grunted and nodded.

By the time Mr. Grin had walked around to the passenger door, Alex was once again up and running. He reached the back of the truck just as it began to move. It was similar to the trucks that he had seen at the SAS camp—it could have been army surplus. The back was tall and square, with a tarpaulin hanging loose to conceal whatever might be inside. Alex clambered onto the moving tailgate and threw himself in. The truck was empty—and he was only just in time. Even as he hit the floor, one of the cars started up behind him, flooding the back of the truck with its headlights. If he had waited even a few seconds more, he would have been seen.

In all, a convoy of five vehicles left Sayle Enterprises. The truck Alex was in was the last but one. In addition to Mr. Grin and Nadia Vole, at least a dozen uniformed guards were making the journey. But where to? Alex didn't dare look out the back, not with a car right behind him. He felt the truck slow down as they reached the main gate and then they were out on the main road, driving rapidly uphill, away from the village.

Alex felt the journey without seeing it. He was lying on a wooden floor, about ten feet across, with nothing to hold on to as the truck sped around hairpin bends. The walls of the truck were steel and windowless. He only knew they had left the main road when he suddenly found himself being bounced up and down, and he was grateful that the truck was now moving more slowly. He sensed they were going downhill, following a rough track. And now he could hear something, even over the noise of the engine. Waves. They had come down to the sea.

The truck stopped. There was the opening and slamming of car doors, the scrunch of boots on rocks, low voices talking. Alex crouched down, afraid that one of the guards would throw back the tarpaulin and discover him, but the voices faded and he found himself alone. Cautiously, he slipped out the back. He was right. The convoy had parked on a deserted beach.

Looking around, he could see a track leading down from the road that twisted up over the cliffs that surrounded them. Mr. Grin and the others had gathered beside an old stone jetty that stretched out into the black water. He was carrying a flashlight. Alex saw him swing it in an arc.

Growing ever more curious, he crept forward and found a hiding place behind a clump of boulders. It seemed that they were waiting for a boat. He looked at his watch. It was exactly two o'clock. He almost wanted to laugh. Give the men flintlock pistols and horses and they could have come straight out of a children's book. Smuggling on the Cornish coast. Could that be what this was all about? Cocaine or marijuana coming in from the Continent? Why else come here in the middle of the night?

The question was answered a few seconds later. Alex stared, unable to quite believe what he was seeing.

A submarine. It had emerged from the sea with the speed and the impossibility of a huge stage illusion.

One moment there was nothing and then it was there in front of him, plowing through the sea toward the jetty, its engine making no sound, water streaking off its silver casing and churning white behind it. The submarine had no markings, but Alex knew it wasn't English. The shape of the diving plane slashing horizontally through the conning tower and the shark's tail rudder at the back was like nothing he had ever seen. He wondered if it was nuclear powered. A conventional engine would surely have made more noise.

And what was it doing here, off the coast of Cornwall? Not for the first time, Alex felt very small and very young. Whatever was going on here, he knew he was way out of his depth.

And then the tower opened and a man climbed out, stretching himself in the cold morning air. Even without the half-moon, Alex would have recognized the sleek dancer's body and the close-cropped hair of the man whose photograph he had seen only a few days before. It was Yassen Gregorovich. Alex stared at him with growing fear. This was the contract killer Mrs. Jones had told him about. The man who had murdered Ian Rider. He was dressed in gray overalls and sneakers. He was smiling. He was the last person Alex wanted to meet.

At the same time he forced himself to stay where he was. He had to work this out. Yassen Gregorovich had supposedly met Sayle in Cuba. Now here he was in Cornwall. So the two of them were working together.

But why? Why should the Stormbreaker project possibly need a man like him?

Nadia Vole walked to the end of the jetty and Yassen climbed down to join her. They spoke for a few minutes, but even assuming they had chosen the English language, there was no chance of their being overheard. Meanwhile, the guards from Sayle Enterprises had formed a line stretching back almost to the point where the vehicles were parked. Yassen gave an order and, as Alex watched from behind the rocks, a metallic silver box with a vacuum seal appeared, held by unseen hands, at the top of the submarine's tower.

Yassen himself passed it down to the first of the guards, who then passed it back up the line. About forty more boxes followed, one after another. It took almost an hour to unload the submarine. The men handled the boxes carefully. They obviously didn't want to break whatever was inside.

By the end of the hour they were almost finished. The boxes were being repacked now into the back of the truck that Alex had vacated. And that was when it happened. One of the men, standing on the jetty, dropped one of the boxes. He managed to catch it again at the last minute, but even so it banged down heavily on the stone surface. Everyone stopped. Instantly. It was as if a switch had been thrown and Alex could almost feel the raw fear in the air.

Yassen was the first to recover. He darted forward along the jetty, moving like a cat, his feet making no sound. He reached the box and ran his hands over it, checking the seal, then nodded slowly. The metal wasn't even dented.

With everyone so still, Alex heard the exchange that followed.

"I'm sorry," the guard said. "I won't do that again."

"No. You won't," Yassen agreed, and shot him.

The bullet spat out of his hand, red in the darkness. It hit the man in the chest, propelling him backward in an awkward cartwheel. The man fell into the sea. For a few seconds he looked up at the moon as if trying to admire it one last time. Then the black water folded over him.

It took them another twenty minutes to finish loading the truck. Yassen got into the front seat with Nadia Vole. This time Mr. Grin went in one of the cars.

Alex had to time his return carefully. As the truck picked up speed, rumbling back up toward the road, he left the cover of the rocks, ran forward and pulled himself in. There was hardly any room with all the boxes, but he managed to find a hole and squeezed himself into it. He ran a hand over one of the boxes. It was about the size of a toaster oven, unmarked, and cold to the touch. Close up, it looked like the sort of thing you might take on a high-tech picnic. He tried to find a way to open it, but it was locked in a way he didn't understand.

He looked back out of the truck. The beach and the jetty were already far below them. The submarine was pulling out to sea. One moment it was there, sleek and silver, gliding through the water. The next it had sunk below the surface, disappearing as quickly as a bad dream.

DEATH IN THE LONG GRASS

ALEX WAS WOKEN up by an indignant Nadia Vole, knocking at his door. He had overslept.

“This morning it is your last opportunity to experience the Stormbreaker,” she said.

“Right,” Alex replied.

“This afternoon we begin to send the computers out to the schools. Herr Sayle has suggested that you take the afternoon for leisure. A walk perhaps into Port Tallion? There is a footpath that goes through the fields and then by the sea. You will do that, yes?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Good. And now I leave you to put on some clothing. I will come back for you in ... zehn minuten. ”

Alex splashed cold water on his face before getting dressed. It had been four o’clock by the time he had gotten back to his room and he was still tired. His night expedition hadn’t been quite the success he’d hoped. He had seen so much—the submarine, the silver boxes, the death of the guard who had dared to drop one—and yet in the end he still hadn’t learned much of anything.

Yassen Gregorovich was working for Herod Sayle. That much was certain. But what about the boxes? They could have contained packed lunches for the staff of Sayle Enterprises for all he knew. Except that you don’t kill a man for dropping a packed lunch.

Today was March 31. As Vole had said, the computers were on their way out. There was only one day to go until the ceremony at the Science Museum. But Alex had nothing to report, and the one piece of information that he had sent—Ian Rider’s diagram—had also drawn a blank. There had been a reply waiting for him on the screen of his Game Boy when he turned it on before going to bed.

UNABLE TO RECOGNIZE DIAGRAM OR

LETTERS /NUMBERS. POSSIBLE MAP

REFERENCE BUT UNABLE TO SOURCE

MAP. PLEASE TRANSMIT FURTHER

OBSERVATIONS.

Alex had thought of transmitting the fact that he had actually sighted Yassen Gregorovich. But he had decided against it. If Yassen was there, Mrs. Jones had promised to pull him out. And suddenly Alex wanted to see this through to the end. Something was going on at Sayle Enterprises. He’d never forgive himself if he didn’t find out what it was.

Nadia Vole came back for him as promised, and he spent the next three hours toying with the Stormbreaker. This time he enjoyed himself less. And this time he noticed when he went to the door, a guard had been posted in the corridor outside. It seemed that Sayle Enterprises wasn’t taking any more chances where he was concerned.

One o’clock arrived and with it a sandwich, delivered on a paper plate. Ten minutes later the guard released him from the room and escorted him as far as the main gate. It was a glorious afternoon, the

sun shining as he walked out onto the road. He took a last look back. Mr. Grin had just come out of one of the buildings and was standing some distance away, talking into a mobile telephone. There was something unnerving about the sight. Why should he be making a telephone call now? And who could possibly understand a word he said?

It was only once he'd left the plant that Alex was able to relax. Away from the fences, the armed guards, and the strange sense of threat that pervaded Sayle Enterprises, it was as if he were breathing fresh air for the first time in days. The Cornish countryside was beautiful, the rolling hills a lush green, dotted with wildflowers.

He found the footpath sign and turned off the road. From the lay of the land, and remembering the car journey that had first brought him here, he guessed that Port Tallon was a couple of miles away, a walk of less than an hour if the route wasn't too hilly. In fact, the path climbed upward quite steeply almost at once, and suddenly Alex found himself perched over a clear, blue, and sparkling English Channel, following a track that zigzagged precariously along the edge of a cliff. To one side of him, the fields stretched into the distance with the long grass bending in the breeze. To the other, there was a fall of at least five hundred feet to the rocks and the water below. Port Tallon itself was at the very end of the cliffs, tucked in against the sea. It looked almost too quaint from here, like a model in a black-and-white Hollywood film.

He came to a break in the path with a second, much tougher track leading away from the sea and across the fields. His instincts would have told him to go straight ahead, but a footpath sign pointed to the right.

There was something strange about the sign. Alex hesitated for a moment, wondering what it was. Then he dismissed it. He was walking in the countryside and the sun was shining. What could possibly be wrong?

He followed the sign.

The path continued rising and falling for about another quarter of a mile, then dipped down into a hollow.

Here the grass was almost as tall as he was, rising up all around him, a shimmering green cage. A bird suddenly erupted in front of him, a ball of brown feathers that spun around on itself before taking flight.

Something had disturbed it. And that was when Alex heard the sound, an engine getting closer. A tractor?

No. It was too high-pitched and moving too fast.

Alex knew he was in danger the same way an animal does. There was no need to ask why or how. Danger was simply there. And even as the dark shape appeared, crashing through the grass, he was throwing himself to one side, knowing—too late now—what it was that had been wrong about the second footpath sign. It had been brand-new. But the first sign, the one that had led him off the road, had been weather-beaten and old. Someone had deliberately led him away from the correct path and brought him here.

To the killing field.

He hit the ground and rolled to one side. The vehicle burst through the grass, its front wheel just

inches above his head. Alex caught a glimpse of a squat black thing with four fat tires, a cross between a miniature tractor and a motorbike. It was being ridden by a hunched-up figure in gray leather with helmet and goggles. Then it was gone, thudding down in the grass on the other side of him and disappearing instantly as if a curtain had been drawn.

Alex scrambled to his feet and began to run. He knew what it was now. He'd seen something similar on holiday, in the sand dunes of Death Valley, Nevada. A Kawasaki four by four, powered by a 400cc engine with automatic transmission. A quad bike. It was circling now, preparing to come after him. And it wasn't alone.

A drone, then a scream, and then a second bike appeared in front of him, roaring toward him, cutting a swath through the grass. Alex hurled himself out of its path, once again crashing into the ground, almost dislocating his shoulder. Wind and engine fumes whipped across his face.

He had to find somewhere to hide. But he was in the middle of a field and there was nowhere—apart from the grass itself. Desperately, he fought through it, the blades scratching at his face, half blinding him as he tried to find his way back to the main path. He needed to find someone—anyone. Whoever had sent these people (and now he remembered Mr. Grin, talking on his mobile phone), they couldn't kill him if there were witnesses around.

But there was no one and they were coming for him again ... together this time. Alex could hear the engines, whining in unison, coming up fast behind him. Still running, he glanced over his shoulder and saw them, one on each side, seemingly about to overtake him. It was only the glint of the sun and the sight of the grass slicing itself in half that revealed the horrible truth. The two cyclists had stretched a length of cheese wire between them. Alex threw himself headfirst, flat on his stomach. The cheese wire whipped over him. If he had still been standing up, it would have cut him in half.

The quad bikes separated, arcing away from each other. At least that meant that they must have dropped the wire. Alex had bruised his knee in the last fall and he knew that it was only a matter of time before they cornered him and finished him off. Half limping, he ran forward, searching for somewhere to hide or something to defend himself with. Apart from the Game Boy and some money, he had nothing in his pockets, not even a penknife. The engines were distant now, but he knew that any moment they would be closing in again. What would the riders have in store for him next time? More cheese wire? Or something worse?

It was worse. Much worse. There was the roar of an engine and then a billowing cloud of red fire exploded over the grass, blazing it to a crisp. Alex felt it singe his shoulders, yelled, and threw himself to one side.

One of the riders was carrying a flamethrower! He had just aimed a bolt of fire twenty feet long, meaning to burn Alex alive. And he had almost succeeded. Alex was saved only by a narrow ditch in front of him.

He hadn't even seen it until he had thudded into the ground, into the damp soil, the jet of flame licking at the air just above him. It had been close. There was a horrible smell: his own hair. The fire had singed the ends.

Choking, his face streaked with dirt and sweat, he clambered out of the ditch and ran blindly forward. He had no idea where he was going anymore. He only knew that in a few seconds the quad would be back.

But he had taken only ten paces before he realized he had reached the edge of the field. There was a warning sign and an electrified fence stretching as far as he could see. But for the buzzing sound that the fence was making, he would have run right into it. The fence was almost invisible, and the quad bikers, moving fast toward him, would be unable to hear the warning sound over their own engines ...

He stopped and turned around. About fifty yards away from him, the grass was being flattened by the still invisible quad as it made its next charge. But this time Alex waited. He stood there, balancing on the heels of his feet, like a matador. Twenty yards, ten ... Now he was staring straight into the eyes of the rider, saw the man's uneven teeth as he smiled, still gripping the flamethrower. The quad smashed down the last barrier of grass and leaped onto him ... except that Alex was no longer there. He had dived to one side and, too late, the driver saw the fence and rocketed on, straight into it. The man screamed as the wire caught him around the neck, almost garroting him. The bike twisted in midair, then crashed down. The man fell into the grass and lay still.

He had torn the fence out of the ground. Alex ran over to the man and examined him. For a moment he thought it might be Yassen, but it was a younger man, dark haired, ugly. Alex had never seen him before.

The man was unconscious but still breathing. The flamethrower lay extinguished on the ground beside him. Behind him, he heard the other bike, some distance away but closing. Whoever these people were, they had tried to run him down, to cut him in half, and to incinerate him. He had to find a way out before they really got serious.

He ran over to the quad, which had come to rest lying on its side. He heaved it up again, jumped onto the saddle, and kick started it. Or tried to. His foot scrabbled desperately but couldn't find anything to kick.

Alex cursed. He might have seen quad bikes in Nevada, but he hadn't been allowed to ride one. He was too young. And now ...

How did you get the damn thing started? There was nothing to kick. So there had to be some sort of manual ignition. He twisted the key. Nothing. Then he saw a red button right in the middle. He pressed it and the engine coughed into life. At least there were no gears to worry about. Alex twisted the accelerator and yelled out as the machine rocketed away, almost throwing him backward off the saddle.

And now he was whipping through the grass, which had become a green blur, hanging on with all his strength as the quad carried him back toward the footpath. He wasn't sure if he was steering the bike or if the bike was steering him, but all he cared about was that he was still moving. His bones rattled as the quad hit a rut in the track and bounced upward. For a ghastly second Alex thought he was going to be hurled off the bike and into space. But somehow he managed to keep his grip, even though the crash of the tires hitting the ground punched out all his breath.

He cut through another green curtain and savagely pulled on the handlebars, trying to bring the machine under control. He had found the footpath—and also the side of the cliff. just five yards more and he would have launched himself over the edge and down to the rocks below. For a few seconds he sat where he was, the engine idling. That was when the other quad appeared. The second rider must have seen what had happened. He had reached the footpath and was facing Alex, about two hundred feet away. Something glinted in his hand, resting on the handlebar. He was carrying a gun.

Alex looked back the way he had come. It was no good. The path was too narrow. By the time he had turned the quad around, the man would have reached him. One shot and it would all be over. Could he go back into the grass? No, for the same reason. If he wanted to move fast, he had to move forward, even if that meant heading for a straight-on collision with the other quad.

There was no other way.

The man gunned his engine and sputtered forward. Alex did the same. Now the two of them were racing toward each other down a narrow path with a bank of earth and rock suddenly rising up to form a barrier on one side and the edge of the cliff on the other. There wasn't enough room for them to pass. They could stop or they could crash ... but if they were going to stop they had to do it in the next ten seconds.

The quads were getting closer and closer, moving faster all the time. Far below, the waves glittered silver, breaking against the rocks. The grass, higher now, flashed by. The man fired his gun twice. Alex felt the first bullet slice past his shoulder. The second ricocheted off the side of his bike, almost causing him to lose control. The wind rushed into him, hammering at his chest and face. It was like the old-fashioned game of chicken. One of them had to stop. One of them had to get out of the way.

Three, two, one...

It was the man who finally broke. He was less than twenty feet away, so close that Alex could make out the perspiration on his forehead. If he fired a third shot now, there would be no way he could miss. But he was traveling too fast. The path was too uneven. He couldn't fire and drive at the same time. Just when it seemed that a crash was inevitable, he twisted his quad and swerved off the path, up into the grass. At the same time, he tried to bring the gun around. But he was too late. His quad was slanting, tipping over onto just two of its wheels. The man screamed. His quad hit a rock and bounced upward, landed briefly on the footpath then continued over the edge of the cliff.

Alex had felt the man rush past him but had seen little more than a blur. Now he shuddered to a halt and turned around just in time to watch the other quad fly off the cliff and into the air. The man, still screaming managed to separate himself from the machine on the way down, but the two of them hit the water at the same moment. The quad floated for a few seconds longer than the man.

Who had sent him? It was Nadia Vole who had suggested the walk, but it was Mr. Grin who had actually seen him leave. Mr. Grin had given the order—he was sure of it.

Alex took the quad the rest of the way into Port Tallon. The sun was still shining as he sped down into the little fishing village, but he couldn't enjoy it. He was angry with himself because he knew he'd made too many mistakes. He should have been dead now, he knew. Only luck and a low-voltage electric fence had managed to keep him alive.

DOZMARY MINE

ALEX WALKED THROUGH Port Tallon, past the Fisherman's Arms tavern and up the cobbled street toward the library. It was the middle of the afternoon, but the village seemed to be asleep, the boats bobbing in the harbor, the streets and pavements empty. A few seagulls wheeled lazily over the rooftops, uttering the usual mournful cries. The air smelled of salt and dead fish.

The library was redbrick, Victorian, sitting self-importantly at the top of a hill. Alex pushed open the heavy swing door and went into a room with a tiled chessboard floor and about fifty shelves fanning out from a central reception area. Six or seven people were sitting at tables, working. A man in a thickly knitted jersey was reading Fisherman's Week. Alex went over to the reception. There was the inevitable sign—SILENCE

PLEASE. Beneath it an elderly, round-faced woman sat reading Crime and Punishment.

"Can I help you?" Despite the sign, she had such a loud voice that everyone looked up when she spoke.

"Yes..." Alex had come here because of a chance remark made by Herod Sayle. He had been talking about Ian Rider. "Spent half his time in the village. In the port, the post office, the library." Alex had already seen the post office, another old-fashioned building near the port. He didn't think he'd learn anything there. But the library? Maybe Rider had come here looking for information. Maybe the librarian would remember him.

"I had a friend staying in the village," he said. "I was wondering if he came here. His name's Ian Rider."

"Rider with an i or a y? I don't think we have any Riders at all." The woman tapped a few keys on her computer, then shook her head. "No..."

"He was staying at Sayle Enterprises," Alex said. "He was about forty, thin, fair haired. He drove a BMW."

"Oh yes." The librarian smiled. "He did come here a couple of times. A nice man. Very polite. I knew he didn't come from around here. He was looking for a book..."

"Do you remember what book?"

"Of course I do. I can't always remember faces, but I never forget a book. He was interested in viruses."

"Viruses?"

"Yes. That's what I said. He wanted information..."

A computer virus! This might change everything. A computer virus was the perfect piece of sabotage: invisible and instantaneous. A single blip written into the software and every single piece of information in the Stormbreaker software could be destroyed at any time. But Herod Sayle couldn't possibly want to damage his own creation. That would make no sense at all. So maybe Alex had been wrong about him from the very start. Maybe Sayle had no idea what was really going on.

“I’m afraid I couldn’t help him,” the librarian continued. “This is only a small library and our grant’s been cut for the third year running.” She sighed. “Anyway, he said he’d get some books sent down from London.

He told me he had a box at the post office...”

That made sense too. Ian Rider wouldn’t want information sent to Sayle Enterprises, where it could be intercepted.

“Was that the last time you saw him?” Alex asked.

“No. He came back about a week later. He must have gotten what he wanted because this time he wasn’t looking for books about viruses. He was interested in local affairs.”

“What sort of local affairs?”

“Cornish local history. Shelf CL.” She pointed. “He spent an afternoon looking in one of the books and then he left. He hasn’t been back since then, which is a shame. I was rather hoping he’d join the library. Would you like to?”

“Not today, thanks,” Alex said.

Local history. That wasn’t going to help him. Alex nodded at the librarian and made for the door. His hand was just reaching out for the handle when he remembered: CL 475/19.

He reached into his pocket and took out the Game Boy, pulled off the back, and unfolded the square of paper he had found in his bedroom. Sure enough, the letters were the same. CL. They weren’t referring to a grid reference. CL was the label on a book!

Alex went over to the shelf that the librarian had shown him. Books grow old faster when they’re not being read and the ones gathered here were long past retirement, leaning tiredly against one another for support. CL 475/19—the number was printed on the spine—was called *Dozmary: The Story of Cornwall’s Oldest Mine*.

He carried it over to a table, opened it, and quickly skimmed through it, wondering why a history of Cornish tin should have been of interest to Ian Rider. The story it told was a familiar one.

The mine had been owned by the Dozmary family for eleven generations. In the nineteenth century there had been four hundred mines in Cornwall. By the 1990s there were only three. Dozmary was still one of them. The price of tin had collapsed and the mine itself was almost exhausted, but there was no other work in the area and the family had continued running it even though the mine was quickly exhausting them. In 1991, Sir Rupert Dozmary, the last owner, had quietly slipped away and blown his brains out. He was buried in the local churchyard in a coffin, it was said, made of tin.

His children had closed down the mine, selling the land above it to Sayle Enterprises. The mine itself was sealed off with several of the tunnels now underwater.

The book contained a number of old black-and-white photographs: pit ponies and canaries in cages.

Groups of figures standing with axes and lanterns. Now all of them would be under the ground themselves. Flicking through the pages, Alex came to a map, showing the layout of the tunnels at the time when the mine was closed:

It was hard to be sure of the scale, but there was a labyrinth of shafts, tunnels, and railway lines

running for miles underground. Go down into the utter blackness of the underground and you'd be lost instantly. Had Ian Rider made his way into Dozmary? If so, what had he found?

Alex remembered the corridor at the foot of the metal staircase. The dark brown unfinished walls and the lightbulbs hanging on their wires had reminded him of something, and suddenly he knew what it was. The corridor must be nothing more than one of the shafts from the old mine! Suppose Ian Rider had also gone down the staircase. Like Alex, he had been confronted with the locked metal door and had been determined to find his way past it. But he had recognized the corridor for what it was—and that was why he had come back to the library. He had found a book on the Dozmary Mine—this book. The map had shown him a way to the other side of the door.

And he made a note of it!

Alex took out the diagram that Ian Rider had drawn and laid it on the page, on top of the map. Holding the two sheets together, he held them up to the light.

This was what he saw:

The blue lines that Rider had drawn on the sheet fitted exactly over the shafts of the mine, showing the way through. Alex was certain of it. If he could find the entrance to Dozmary, he could follow the map through to the other side of the metal door.

Ten minutes later he left the library with a photocopy of the page. He went down to the harbor and found one of those maritime stores that seem to sell anything and everything. Here he bought himself a powerful flashlight, a jersey, a length of rope, and a box of chalk.

Then he climbed back into the hills.

Back on the quad, Alex raced across the cliff tops with the sun already sinking in the west. Ahead of him he could see the single chimney and crumbling tower that he hoped would mark the entrance to the Kerneweck Shaft ... it took its name from the ancient language of Cornwall. According to the map, this was where he should begin. At least the quad had made his life easier. It would have taken him an hour to reach it on foot.

He was running out of time and he knew it. The first Stormbreakers would have already begun leaving the plant, and in less than twenty-four hours the prime minister would be activating them. If the software really had been bugged with some sort of virus, what would happen? Some sort of humiliation for both Sayle and the British government? Or worse?

And how did a computer bug tie in with what he had seen the night before? Whatever the submarine had been delivering on the jetty, it hadn't been computer software. The silver boxes had been too large. And you don't shoot a man for dropping a diskette.

Alex parked the quad next to the tower and went in through an arched doorway. At first he thought he must have made some sort of mistake. The building looked more like a ruined church than the entrance to a mine. Other people had been here before him. There were a few crumpled beer cans and old potato chip packets on the floor and the usual graffiti on the wall. JRH WAS HERE. NICK LOVES CASS. Visitors leaving the worst parts of themselves behind in fluorescent paint.

His foot came down on something that clanged and he saw that he was standing on a metal trapdoor.

Grass and weeds were sprouting around the edges, but putting his hand against the crack, he could

feel a draft of air rising from below. This must be the entrance to the shaft.

The trapdoor was bolted down with a heavy padlock, several inches thick. Alex swore silently. He had left the zit cream back in his room. The cream would have eaten through the bolts in seconds, but he didn't have the time to go all the way back to Sayle Enterprises to get it. He knelt down and shook the padlock in frustration. To his surprise, it sprang open. Somebody had been here before him. Ian Rider—it had to be.

He must have managed to unlock it and hadn't fully closed it again so that it would be open when he came back.

Alex pulled the padlock out and grabbed the trapdoor. It took all his strength to lift it, and as he did so, a blast of cold air hit him in the face. The trapdoor clanged back and he found himself looking into a black hole that stretched farther than the daylight could reach. Alex shone his flashlight into the hole. The beam went about fifty feet, but the shaft went farther. He found a pebble and dropped it in. At least ten seconds passed before the pebble rattled against something far below.

A rusty ladder ran down the side of the shaft. Alex checked that the quad was out of sight, then looped the rope over his shoulder and shoved the flashlight into his belt. He didn't enjoy climbing into the hole. The metal rungs were ice cold against his hands, and his shoulders had barely sunk beneath the level of the ground before the sun was blotted out and he felt himself being sucked into a darkness so total that he couldn't even be sure he had eyes. But he couldn't climb and hold on to the flashlight at the same time. He had to feel his way, a hand then a foot, descending farther until at last his heel struck the ground and he knew he had reached the bottom of the Kerneweck Shaft.

He looked up. He could just make out the entrance he had climbed through: small, round, as distant as the moon. He was breathing heavily. The air was thin and smelled faintly metallic. Trying to fight off the sense of claustrophobia, he pulled out the flashlight and flicked it on. The beam leaped out of his hand, pointing the way ahead and throwing pure white light onto his immediate surroundings. Alex was at the start of a long tunnel, the uneven walls and ceiling held back by wooden beams. The floor was already damp, and a sheen of salt water hung in the air. It was cold in the mine. He had known it would be, and before he moved, he pulled on the jersey he had bought, then chalked a large X on the wall. That had been a good idea too. Whatever happened down here, he wanted to be sure he could find the way back.

At last he was ready. He took two steps forward, away from the vertical shaft and into the start of the tunnel, and immediately felt the weight of the solid rock, the soil, and the remaining streaks of tin bearing down on him. It was horrible here, like being buried alive, and it took all his strength to force himself on.

After about fifty paces he came to a second tunnel, branching off to the left. He took out the photocopied map and examined it. According to Ian Rider, this was where he had to turn off. He swung the flashlight around and followed the tunnel, which slanted downward, taking him deeper and deeper into the earth.

There was absolutely no sound in the mine apart from his own rasping breath, the crunch of his footsteps, and the quickening thud of his heart. It was as if the blackness was wiping out sound as well as vision.

Alex opened his mouth and called out, just to hear something. But his voice sounded small and only

reminded him of the huge weight above his head. This tunnel was in bad repair. Some of the beams had snapped and fallen in, and as he passed, a trickle of gravel hit his neck and shoulders, reminding him that the Dozmary Mine had been kept locked for a reason. It was a hellish place. It could collapse at any time.

The path took him ever deeper. He could feel the pressure pounding in his ears as the darkness grew thicker and more oppressive. He came to a tangle of iron and wire: some sort of machine, long ago buried and forgotten. He climbed over it too quickly, cutting his leg on a piece of jagged metal. He stood still for a few seconds, forcing himself to slow down. He knew he mustn't panic. He forced himself to think. If you panic, you'll get lost. Think what you're doing. Be careful. One step at a time...

"Okay. Okay..." He whispered the words to reassure himself, then continued forward.

Now he emerged into a sort of wide circular chamber, formed by the meeting of six different tunnels, all coming together in a star shape. The widest of these slanted in from the left with the remains of a railway track. He swung the flashlight and saw a couple of wooden wagons that must have been used to carry equipment down or tin back up to the surface. Checking the map, he was tempted to follow the railway, which seemed to offer a shortcut across the route that Ian Rider had drawn. But he decided against it. The map told him to turn the corner and go back on himself. There had to be a reason. Alex made another two chalk crosses, one for the tunnel he had left, another for the one he was entering. He went on.

This new tunnel quickly became lower and narrower until Alex couldn't walk unless he crouched. The floor was very wet here, with pools of water rising up to his ankles. He remembered how near he was to the sea and that brought another unpleasant thought. What time was high tide? And when the water rose, what would happen inside the mine? Alex suddenly had a vision of himself trapped in blackness with water rising up to his chest, his neck, over his face. He stopped and forced himself to think of something else. Down here, on his own, far beneath the surface of the earth, he couldn't make an enemy of his imagination.

The tunnel curved then joined a second railway line, this one bent and broken, covered here and there in rubble, which must have fallen from above. But the metallic tracks made it easier to move forward, picking up the reflection of the flashlight. Alex followed them all the way to a junction with the main railway. It had taken him thirty minutes and he was almost back where he had started, but shining the flashlight around him, he saw why Ian Rider had sent him the long way around. The shorter route had been blocked by a tunnel collapse. About thirty yards up the line, the main railway came to a dead end.

He crossed the track, still following the map, and stopped. He looked at the paper, then again at the way ahead. It was impossible. And yet there was no mistake.

He had come to a small, round tunnel dipping steeply down. But after a brief stretch, the tunnel simply stopped with what looked like a sheet of metal barring the way. Alex picked up a stone and threw it. There was a splash. Now he understood. The tunnel was completely submerged in water as black as ink. The water had risen up to the ceiling of the tunnel, so even assuming he could swim in temperatures that must be close to freezing, he would be unable to breathe. After all his hard work, after all the time he had spent underground, there was no way forward.

Alex turned in frustration. He was about to leave, but even as he swung the flashlight around, the beam picked up something lying in a heap on the ground. He went over to it and leaned down. It was a diver's dry suit and it looked brand-new. Alex walked back to the water's edge and examined it with the flashlight.

This time he saw something else. A rope had been tied to a rock. It slanted diagonally into the water and disappeared. Alex knew what it meant.

Ian Rider had swum through the submerged tunnel. He had worn a dry suit and he had managed to fix a rope to guide him through. Obviously he had planned to come back. That was why he had left the dry suit there. And why he had left the padlock open.

Alex picked up the dry suit. It was too big for him, although it would probably keep out the worst of the chill.

But the cold wasn't the only problem. The tunnel might run for ten yards. It might run for a hundred. How could he be sure that Ian hadn't used scuba equipment to swim through? If Alex went down there, into the water, and ran out of breath halfway, he would drown. Again his imagination got the better of him. He could see himself, pinned underneath the rock in the freezing blackness. He couldn't imagine a worse way to die.

He stood for a moment, holding the suit in his hands. Suddenly everything seemed unfair. He had never asked to be here. He had been forced into this by M16 and he'd already done more than enough. There was nothing on earth that would make him enter the blackness of the water. It was simply too much to ask.

But Ian Rider had swum through. Ian Rider had done it all, on his own, and he had never stopped ... not until the day they had killed him. And Alex had always assumed he was nothing more than a bank manager! He felt his resolve give way to anger. These people—Sayle, Yassen, whoever—had snuffed out his uncle's life simply because it had suited them. Well, he didn't die for nothing. Alex would see to that.

He pulled on the dry suit. It was cold, clammy, and uncomfortable. He zipped it up at the front. He hadn't taken off his street clothes and that had perhaps helped. The suit was loose in places, but he was sure it would keep the water out.

Moving quickly now, afraid that if he hesitated he would change his mind, Alex approached the water's edge. He reached out and took the rope in one hand. It would be faster swimming with both hands, but he didn't dare risk it. Getting lost in the underwater tunnel would be as bad as running out of air. The result would be exactly the same. He had to keep hold of the rope to allow it to guide him through. Alex took several deep breaths, hyperventilating and oxygenating his blood, knowing it would give him a few precious extra seconds. Then he plunged in.

The cold was ferocious, a hammer blow that nearly forced the air out of his lungs. The water pounded at his head, swirling around his nose and eyes. His fingers were instantly numb. His whole system felt the shock but the dry suit was holding, sealing in at least some of his body warmth. Clinging to the rope, he kicked forward. He had committed himself. There could be no going back.

Pull, kick. Pull, kick. Alex had been underwater for less than a minute, but already his lungs were feeling the strain. The roof of the tunnel was scraping his shoulders and he was afraid that it would tear through the dry suit and gouge into his skin as well. But he didn't dare slow down.

Pull, kick. Pull, kick. The freezing cold was sucking the strength out of him. How long had he been under?

Ninety seconds? A hundred? His eyes were shut tight, but if he opened them there would be no difference.

He was in a black, swirling, freezing version of hell. And his breath was running out.

He pulled himself forward along the rope, scratching the skin off the palms of his hands. He had been swimming for almost two minutes, but it felt closer to ten. He had to open his mouth and breathe ... even if it was water, and not air, that rushed into his throat. A silent scream exploded inside him. Pull, kick. Pull, kick. And then the rope tilted upward and he felt his shoulders come clear and his mouth was wrenched open in a great gasp as he breathed air and knew that he had just made it.

But made it to where?

Alex couldn't see anything. He was floating in utter darkness, unable to see even where the water ended.

He had left the flashlight on the other side, and he knew that even if he wanted to, he didn't have the strength to go back. He had followed the trail left by a dead man. It was only now that he realized it might lead only to a grave.

BEHIND THE DOOR

ALEX SWAM FORWARD slowly, completely blind, afraid that at any moment he would crack his head against rock. Despite the dry suit, he had long ago felt the chill of the water and knew that he had to find his way onto dry land soon. His hand brushed against something, but his fingers were too numb to tell what it was. He reached out and pulled himself forward. His feet touched the bottom. And it was then that he realized he could see. Somehow, from somewhere, light was seeping into the area beyond the submerged tunnel.

Slowly, his vision adjusted itself. Waving his hand in front of his face, he could just make out his fingers.

He was holding on to a wooden beam, a collapsed roof support. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. The darkness had retreated, showing him a crossroads cut into the rock, the meeting place of three tunnels. The fourth, behind him, was the one that was flooded. As vague as the light was, it gave him strength. Using the beam as a makeshift jetty, he clambered onto the rock. At the same time, he became aware of a soft throbbing sound. He couldn't be sure if it was near or far, but he remembered what he had heard under Block D, in front of the metal door, and he knew that he had arrived.

He stripped off the dry suit. It had served him well.

The main part of his body was dry, even though ice cold water dripped out of his hair and down his neck.

His shoes and socks were sodden. When he moved forward his feet squelched and he had to take off his shoes and shake them out before he could go on. Ian Rider's map was still folded in his pocket, but he no longer had any need of it. All he had to do was follow the light.

He went straight forward to another intersection, then turned right. The light was so bright now that he could actually make out the color of the rock-dark brown and gray. The throbbing was also getting louder, and Alex could feel a rush of cool air streaming down toward him. He moved forward cautiously, wondering what he was about to come to. He turned a corner and suddenly the rock on both sides gave way to new brick with metal grills set at intervals just above the level of the floor. The old mine shaft had been converted. It was being used as the outlet for some sort of air-conditioning system. The light that had guided Alex here was coming out of the grills.

He knelt beside the first of these and looked through into a large white-tiled room, a laboratory with complicated glass and steel equipment laid out over work surfaces. The room was empty. Tentatively, Alex took hold of the grill, but it was firmly secured, bolted into the rock face. The second grill belonged to the same room. It was also screwed in tight. Alex continued up the tunnel to a third grill. This one looked into a storage room filled with the silver boxes that Alex had seen being delivered by the submarine the night before.

He took the grill in both hands and pulled. It came away from the wall easily, and looking closer, he understood why. Once again, Ian Rider had been here ahead of him. He had cut through the bolts holding it in place. Alex set the grill down silently, glad that he had found the strength to go forward.

Carefully, he squeezed through the rectangular hole in the wall and into the room. At the last minute, lying on his stomach with his feet dangling below, he reached for the grill and set it back in place. Provided nobody looked too closely, they wouldn't see anything wrong. The ground was a long way away, at least twice his own height, but that wasn't going to stop him now. He dropped down and landed, catlike, on the balls of his feet. The throbbing was louder, coming from somewhere outside. It would cover any noise he made. He went over to the nearest of the silver boxes and examined it. He found two catches on the lid and pressed. The box clicked open in his hands, but when he looked inside, it was empty. Whatever had been delivered was already in use.

He checked for cameras, found none, then crossed to the door. It was unlocked. He opened it, one inch at a time, and peered out. The door led onto a wide corridor with an automatic sliding door at each end and a silver rail running its full length.

“Nineteen hundred hours. Red shift to assembly line. Blue shift to decontamination.”

The voice rang out over a loudspeaker system, neither male nor female; emotionless, inhuman. Alex glanced at his watch. It was already seven o'clock in the evening. It had taken him longer than he had thought to get through the mine. He stole forward. It wasn't exactly a passage that he had found. It was more an observation platform. He reached the rail and looked down.

Alex hadn't had any idea what he would find behind the metal door, but what he was seeing now was far beyond anything he could have imagined. It was a huge chamber, the walls—half naked rock, half polished steel—lined with computer equipment, electronic meters, machines that blinked and flickered with a life of their own. It was staffed by forty or fifty people, some in white coats, others in overalls, all wearing armbands of different colors: red, yellow, blue, and green. Arc lights beamed down from above. Armed guards stood at each doorway, watching the work with blank faces.

For this was where the Stormbreakers were being assembled. The computers were being slowly carried in a long, continuous line along a conveyor belt, past the various scientists and technicians. The strange thing was that they already looked finished ... and of course they had to be. Sayle had told him. They were actually being shipped out during the course of the afternoon and night. So what last-minute adjustment was being made here in this secret factory? And why was so much of the production line hidden away?

What Alex had seen as he crept around Sayle Enterprises had only been the tip of the iceberg. The main body of the factory was here, underground.

He looked more closely. He remembered the Stormbreaker that he had used and now he noticed something that he hadn't seen then. A strip of plastic had been drawn back in the casing above each of the screens to reveal a small compartment, cylindrical and about five inches deep. The computers were passing underneath a bizarre machine—cantilevers, wires, and hydraulic arms. Opaque, silver test tubes were being fed along a narrow cage, moving forward as if to greet the computers: one tube for each computer.

There was a meeting point. With infinite precision, the tubes were lifted out, brought around, and then dropped into the exposed compartments. After that, the Stormbreakers were accelerated forward. A second machine closed and heatsealed the plastic strip. By the time the computers reached the end of the line, where they were packed into red-and-white Sayle Enterprises boxes, the compartments were completely invisible.

A movement caught his eye and Alex looked beyond the assembly line and through a huge window into the chamber next door. Two men in space suits were walking clumsily together, as if in slow motion. They stopped. An alarm began to sound and suddenly they disappeared in a cloud of white steam. Alex remembered what he had just heard. Were they being decontaminated? But if the Stormbreakers were based on the round processor there couldn't possibly be any need for such extremes—and anyway, this was like nothing Alex had ever seen before. If the men were being decontaminated, what were they being decontaminated from?

“Agent Gregorovich, report to the biocontainment zone. This is a call for agent Gregorovich.”

A lean, fair-haired figure dressed in black detached himself from the assembly line and walked languidly toward a door that slid open to receive him. For the second time Alex found himself looking at the Russian contract killer, Yassen Gregorovich. What was going on? Alex thought back to the submarine and the vacuum-sealed boxes. Of course. Yassen had brought the test tubes that were even now being inserted into the computers. The test tubes were some sort of weapon that he was using to sabotage them. No. That wasn't possible. Back in Port Tallon, the librarian had told him that Ian Rider had been asking for books about computer viruses.

Viruses.

Decontamination.

The biocontainment zone ...

Understanding came and with it something cold and solid jabbing into the back of his neck. Alex hadn't even heard the door open behind him, but he slowly straightened up as a voice spoke softly into his ear.

“Stand up. Keep your hands by your sides. If you make any sudden move, I'll shoot you in the head.”

He looked slowly around. A single guard stood behind him, a gun in his hand. It was the sort of thing that Alex had seen a thousand times in films and on television, and he was shocked by how different the reality was. The gun was a Browning automatic pistol and one twitch of the man's finger would send a 9mm bullet shattering through his skull and into his brain. The very thought of it made him feel sick.

He stood up. The guard was in his twenties, pale faced and puzzled. Alex had never seen him before, but more importantly, he had never seen Alex. He hadn't expected to come across a boy. That might help.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm staying with Mr. Sayle,” Alex said. He stared at the gun. “Why are you pointing that at me? I'm not doing anything wrong.”

He sounded pathetic. Little boy lost. But it had the desired effect. The guard hesitated, slightly lowering the gun. At that moment Alex struck. It was another classic karate blow, this time twisting his body around and driving his elbow into the side of the man's head, just below his ear. The guard didn't even cry out. His eyes rolled and he went limp. Alex had almost certainly knocked him out with the single punch, but he couldn't take chances and followed it through with a knee into the groin. The guard folded, his pistol falling to the ground. Quickly, Alex dragged him back, away from the railings. He looked down. Nobody had seen what had happened.

But the guard wouldn't be unconscious long and Alex knew he had to get out of here, not just back up to ground level but out of Sayle Enterprises altogether. He had to contact Mrs. Jones. He still didn't know how or why, but he knew now that the Stormbreakers had been turned into killing machines. There were less than twenty-four hours until the launch at the Science Museum. Somehow Alex had to stop it from happening.

He ran. The door at the end of the passage slid open and he found himself in a curving white corridor with windowless offices built into what must be yet more shafts of the Dozmary Mine. He knew he couldn't go back the way he had come. He was too tired, and even if he could find his way through the mine, he'd never be able to manage the swim a second time. His only chance was the door that had first led him here.

It led to the metal staircase that would bring him to Block D. There was a telephone in his room. Failing that, he could use the Game Boy to transmit a message. But M16 had to know what he had found out.

He reached the end of the corridor then ducked back as three guards appeared, walking together toward a set of double doors. Fortunately, they hadn't seen him. Nobody knew he was here. He was going to be all right.

And then the alarms went off. A siren wailing electronically along the corridors, leaping out from the corners, echoing everywhere. Overhead, a light began to flash red. The guards wheeled around and saw Alex.

Unlike the man on the observation platform, they didn't hesitate. As Alex leaped headfirst through the nearest door, they brought up their machine guns and fired. Bullets slammed into the wall beside him and ricocheted along the passageway. Alex landed flat on his stomach and kicked out, slamming the door behind him. He straightened up, found a bolt, and rammed it home. A second later there was an explosive hammering on the other side as the guards fired at the door. But it was solid metal. It would hold.

Alex was standing in a metal passageway leading to a tangle of pipes and cylinders, like the boiler room of a ship. The alarm was as loud here as it had been in the main chamber. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. He leaped down the staircase, three steps at a time, and skidded to a halt, searching for a way out. He had a choice of three corridors, but then he heard the rattle of feet and knew that his choice had just become two. He wished now that he had thought to pick up the Browning automatic. He was alone and unarmed. The only duck in a shooting gallery with guns everywhere and no way out. Was this what M16

had trained him for? If so, two weeks hadn't been enough.

He ran on, weaving in and out of the pipes, trying every door he came to. A room with more space suits hanging on hooks. A shower room. Another, larger laboratory with a second door leading out and, in the middle, a glass tank shaped like a barrel, filled with green liquid. Tangles of rubber tubing sprouted out of the tank. Trays filled with test tubes all around.

The barrel-shaped tank. The trays. Alex had seen them before—as vague outlines on his Game Boy. He must have been standing on the other side of the second door. He ran over to it. It was locked from the inside, electronically, with a glass plate against the wall. He would never be able to open it. He was trapped.

Footsteps approached. Alex just had time to hide himself on the floor, underneath one of the work surfaces, before the first door was thrown open and two more guards ran into the laboratory. They took a quick look around without seeing him.

“Not here!” one of them said.

“You’d better go up!”

One guard walked out the way he had come. The other went over to the door and placed his hand on the glass identification panel. There was a green glow and the door buzzed loudly. The guard threw it open and disappeared. Alex rolled forward as the door swung shut and just managed to get his hand into the crack. He waited a moment, then stood up. He opened the door. As he had hoped, he was looking out into the unfinished passageway where he had been surprised by Nadia Vole.

The guard had already gone on ahead. Alex slipped out, closing the door behind him, cutting off the sound of the siren. He made his way up the metal stairs. They led him back to the glass corridor that joined Blocks C and D. Alex was grateful to be back above ground. He found a door and slipped outside. The sun had already set, but across the lawn the airstrip was ablaze, artificially illuminated by the sort of lights Alex had seen in soccer stadiums. There were about a dozen trucks parked next to each other. Men were loading them up with heavy, square red-and-white boxes. The cargo plane that Alex had seen when he arrived rumbled down the runway and lurched into the air.

Alex knew that he was looking at the end of the assembly line. The red-and-white boxes were the same ones he had seen in the underground chamber. The Stormbreakers, complete with their deadly secret, were being loaded up and delivered. By morning they would be all over the country.

Keeping low, he ran past the fountain and across the grass. He thought about making for the main gate, but he knew that was hopeless. The guards would have been alerted. They’d be waiting for him. Nor could he climb the perimeter fence, not with the razor wire stretched out across the top. No. His own room seemed the best answer. The telephone was there. And so were his only weapons, the few gadgets that Smithers had given him four days—or was it four years?—ago.

He entered the house through the kitchen, the same way he had left it the night before. It was only eight o’clock, but the whole place seemed to be deserted. He ran up the staircase and along the corridor to his room on the first floor. Slowly, he opened the door. It seemed his luck was holding out. There was nobody there. Without turning on the light, he went inside and snatched up the telephone. The line was dead.

Never mind. He found the cartridges for his Game Boy, his yoyo, and the zit cream and crammed them into his pockets. He had already decided not to stay here. It was too dangerous. He would find somewhere to hide out. Then he would use the Nemesis cartridge to contact M16.

He went back to the door and opened it. With a shock he saw Mr. Grin standing in the hallway, looking hideous with his white face, his ginger hair, and his mauve twisted smile. Alex reacted quickly, striking out with the heel of his right hand. But Mr. Grin was quicker. He ducked to one side, then his hand shot out, the side of it driving into Alex’s throat. Alex gasped for breath but none came. The butler made an inarticulate sound and lashed out a second time. Alex got the impression that behind the livid scars he really was grinning, enjoying himself. He tried to avoid the blow, but Mr. Grin’s fist hit him square on the jaw. He was spun into the bedroom, falling backward.

He never even remembered hitting the floor.

THE SCHOOL BULLY

THEY CAME FOR Alex the following morning.

He had spent the night handcuffed to a radiator in a small dark room with a single barred window. It might once have been a coal cellar. When Alex opened his eyes, the gray first light of the morning was just creeping in. He opened them and closed them again. His head was thumping and the side of his face was swollen where Mr. Grin had hit him. His arms were twisted behind him and the tendons in his shoulder were on fire. But worse than all this was his sense of failure. It was April 1, the day when the Stormbreakers would be unleashed. And Alex was helpless. He had let down M16, his uncle—and himself.

It was just before nine o'clock when the door opened and two guards came in with Mr. Grin behind them.

The handcuffs were unlocked and Alex was forced to his feet. Then, with a guard holding him on each side, he was marched out of the room and up a flight of stairs. He was still in Sayle's house. The stairs led up to the hall with its huge painting of Judgment Day. Alex looked at the figures, writhing in agony on the canvas. If he was right, the image would soon be repeated all over England. And it would happen in just three hours' time.

The guards half dragged him through a doorway and into the room with the aquarium. There was a high-backed wooden chair in front of it. Alex was forced to sit down. His hands were cuffed behind him again.

The guards left. Mr. Grin remained.

He heard the sound of feet on the spiral staircase, saw the leather shoes coming down before he saw the man who wore them. Then Herod Sayle appeared, dressed in an immaculate pale gray silk suit. Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones had been suspicious of the Egyptian multimillionaire from the very start. They'd always thought he had something to hide. But even they had never guessed the truth. He wasn't a friend of England. He was its worst enemy.

"Three questions," Sayle snapped. His voice was utterly cold. "Who are you? Who sent you here? How much do you know?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alex said.

Sayle sighed. If there had been anything comical about him when Alex had first seen him, it had completely evaporated. His face was bored and businesslike. His eyes were ugly, full of menace. "We have very little time," he said. "Mr. Grin...?"

Mr. Grin went over to one of the display cases and took out a knife, razor sharp with a serrated edge. He held it up close to his face, his eyes gleaming.

"I've already told you that Mr. Grin used to be an expert with knives," Sayle continued. "He still is. Tell me what I want to know, Alex, or he will cause you more pain than you could begin to imagine. And don't try to lie to me, please. Just remember what happens to liars. Particularly to their tongues."

Mr. Grin took a step closer. The blade flashed, catching the light.

“My name is Alex Rider,” Alex said.

“Rider’s son.”

“His nephew.”

“Who sent you here?”

“The same people who sent him.” There was no point lying. It didn’t matter anymore. The stakes had become too high.

“M16?” Sayle laughed without any sign of humor. “They send fourteen-year-old boys to do their dirty work? Not very English, I’d have said. Not cricket! What?” He had adopted an exaggerated English accent.

Now he walked forward and sat down behind the desk. “And what of my third question, Alex? How much have you found out?”

Alex shrugged, trying to look casual, to hide the fear he was really feeling. “I know enough,” he said.

“Go on.”

Alex took a breath. Behind him, the jellyfish drifted past like a poisonous cloud. He could see it out of the corner of his eye. He tugged at the handcuffs, wondering if it would be possible to break the chair. There was a sudden flash and the knife that Mr. Grin had been holding was suddenly quivering in the back of the chair, an inch from his head. The edge of the blade had actually nicked the skin of his neck. He felt a trickle of blood slide down over his collar.

“You’re keeping us waiting,” Herod Sayle said.

“All right. When my uncle was here, he became interested in viruses. He asked about them at the local library. I thought he was talking about computer viruses. That was the natural assumption. But I was wrong. I saw what you were doing, last night. I heard them talking on the speaker system.

Decontamination and biocontainment zones. They were talking about biological warfare. You’ve gotten hold of some sort of real virus. It came here in test tubes, packed into silver boxes, and you’ve put them into the Stormbreakers. I don’t know what happens next. I suppose when the computers are turned on, people die. They’re in schools, so it’ll be schoolchildren. Which means that you’re not the saint everyone thinks you are, Mr. Sayle. A mass murderer. A bliddy psycho, I suppose you might say.”

Herod Sayle clapped his hands softly together. “You’ve done very well, Alex,” he said. “I congratulate you.

And I feel you deserve a reward. So I’m going to tell you everything. In a way it’s appropriate that M16

should have sent me a real English schoolboy. Because, you see, there’s nothing in the world I hate more.

Oh yes...” His face twisted with anger, and for a moment, Alex could see the madness, alive in his eyes.

“You bliddy snobs with your stuck-up schools and your stinking English superiority! But I’m going to show you. I’m going to give you what you deserve!”

He stood up and walked over to Alex. "I came to this country forty years ago," he said. "I had no money.

My family had nothing. But for a freak accident, I would probably have lived and died in Cairo. Better for you, if I had! So much better!

"I was brought here and educated by an English family. They were grateful to me because I'd saved their lives. Oh yes. And I was grateful to them too. You cannot imagine how I was feeling then. To be in London, which I had always believed to be the heart of civilization. To see such wealth and to know that I was going to be part of it! I was going to be English! To a child born in the Cairo gutter, it was an impossible dream.

"But I was soon to learn the reality..." Sayle leaned forward and yanked the knife out of the chain He tossed it to Mr. Grin, who caught it and spun it in his hand.

"From the moment I arrived at the school, I was mocked and bullied. Because of my size. Because of my dark skin. Because I couldn't speak English well. Because I wasn't one of them. They had names for me.

Herod Smell. Goat-boy. The dwarf. And they played tricks on me. Pins on the chair. Books stolen and defaced. My trousers ripped off me and hung out on the flagpole underneath the Union Jack." Sayle shook his head slowly. "I had loved that flag when I first came here," he said. "But in only weeks I came to hate it."

"Lots of people are bullied at school—" Alex began and stopped as Sayle backhanded him viciously across the face.

"I haven't finished," Sayle said. He was breathing heavily and there was spittle on his lower lip. Alex could see him reliving the past. And once again he was allowing the past to destroy him.

"There were plenty of bullies in that school," he said. "But there was one who was worse than any of them.

He was a small, smarmy shrimp of a boy, but his parents were rich and he had a way with the other children. He knew how to talk his way around them ... a politician even then. Oh yes. He could be charming when he wanted to. When there were teachers around. But the moment their backs were turned, he was onto me. He used to organize the others. 'Let's get the goat-boy. Let's push his head in the toilet.' He had a thousand ideas to make my life miserable and he never stopped thinking up more. All the time he goaded me and taunted me and there was nothing I could do because he was popular and I was a foreigner. And do you know who that boy grew up to be?"

"No, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me," Alex said.

"I am going to tell you. Yes. He grew up to be the bliddy prime minister!"

Sayle took out a white silk handkerchief and wiped his face. His bald head was gleaming with sweat. "All my life I've been treated the same way," he continued. "No matter how successful I've become, how much money I've made, how many people I've employed. I'm still a joke. I'm still Herod Smell, the goat-boy, the Cairo tramp. Well, for forty years I've been planning my revenge. And now, at last, my time has come.

Mr. Grin..."

Mr. Grin went over to the wall and pressed a button. Alex half expected the snooker table to rise out of the floor, but instead, on every wall, a panel slid up to reveal floor-to-ceiling television screens that immediately flickered into life. On one screen Alex could see the underground laboratory, on another the assembly line, on a third the airstrip with the last of the trucks on its way out. There were closed-circuit television cameras everywhere, and Sayle could see every corner of his kingdom without even leaving the room. No wonder Alex had been discovered so easily.

“The Stormbreakers are armed and ready. And yes, you’re right, Alex. Each one contains what you might call a computer virus. But that, if you like, is my little April Fools’ joke. Because the virus I’m talking about is a form of smallpox. Of course, Alex, it’s been genetically modified to make it faster and stronger ... more lethal. A spoonful of the stuff would destroy a city. And my Stormbreakers hold much, much more than that.

“At the moment it’s isolated, quite safe. But this afternoon there’s going to be a bit of a party at the Science Museum. Every school in England will be joining in, with the schoolchildren gathered around their nice, new shiny computers. And at midday, on the stroke of twelve, my old friend, the prime minister, will make one of his smug, self-serving speeches and then he’ll press a button. He thinks he’ll be activating the computers, and in a way, he’s right. Pressing the button will release the virus, and by midnight tonight, there will be no more schoolchildren in England and the prime minister will weep as he remembers the day he first bullied Herod Sayle!”

“You’re mad!” Alex exclaimed. “By midnight tonight you’ll be in jail.”

Sayle dismissed the thought with a wave of the hand. “I think not. By the time anyone realizes what has happened, I’ll be gone. I’m not alone in this, Alex. I have powerful friends who have supported me—”

“Yassen Gregorovich.”

“You have been busy!” He seemed surprised that Alex knew the name. “Yassen is working for the people who have been helping me. Let’s not mention any names or even nationalities. You’d be surprised how many countries there are in the world who loathe the English. Most of Europe, just to begin with. But anyway...” He clapped his hands and went back to his desk. “Now you know the truth. I’m glad I was able to tell you, Alex. You have no idea how much I hate you. Even when we were playing that stupid game of snooker, I was thinking how much pleasure it would give me to kill you. You’re just like the boys I was at school with. Nothing has changed.”

“You haven’t changed,” Alex said. His cheek was still smarting where Sayle had hit him. But he’d heard enough. “I’m sorry you were bullied at school,” he said. “But lots of kids get bullied and they don’t turn into nutcases. You’re really sad, Mr. Sayle. And your plan won’t work. I’ve told M16 everything I know.

They’ll be waiting for you at the Science Museum. So will the men in white coats.”

Sayle giggled. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” he said. His face was suddenly stone. “And perhaps you forget that I warned you about lying to me.”

Mr. Grin took a step forward, flipping the knife over so that the blade landed in the flat of his hand.

“I’d like to watch you die,” Sayle said. “Unfortunately, I have a pressing engagement in London.” He turned to Mr. Grin. “You can walk with me to the helicopter. Then come back here and kill the boy.

Make it slow. Make it painful. We should have kept back some smallpox for him, but I'm sure you'll think of something much more creative.”

He walked to the door, then stopped and turned to Alex.

“Good-bye, Alex. It wasn't a pleasure knowing you. But enjoy your death. And remember. You're only going to be the first...”

The door swung shut. Handcuffed to the chair with the jellyfish floating silently behind him, Alex was left alone.

DEEP WATER

ALEX GAVE up trying to break free of the chair. His wrists were bruised and bloody where the chain cut into him, but the cuffs were too tight. After thirty minutes, when Mr. Grin still hadn't come back, Alex had tried to reach the zit cream that Smithers had given him. He knew it would burn through the handcuffs in seconds, and the worst thing was he could actually feel it, where he had put it, in the zipped-up outer pocket of his combat trousers. But although his outstretched fingers were only a few inches away, try as he might he couldn't reach it. It was enough to drive him mad.

He had heard the clatter of a helicopter taking off and knew that Herod Sayle must be on his way to London. Alex was still reeling from what he had heard. The multimillionaire was completely insane. What he was planning was beyond belief, a mass murder that would destroy Britain for generations to come.

Alex tried to imagine what was about to happen. Tens of thousands of schoolchildren would be sitting in their classes, gathered around their new Stormbreakers, waiting for the moment—at midday exactly —

when the prime minister would press the button and bring them on-line. But, instead, there would be a hiss and a small cloud of deadly smallpox vapor would be released into the crowded room. And minutes later, all over the country, the dying would begin. Alex had to close his mind to the thought. It was too horrible. And yet it was going to happen in just a couple of hours' time. He was the only person who could stop it. And here he was, tied down, unable to move.

The door opened. Alex twisted around, expecting to see Mr. Grin, but it was Nadia Vole who hurried in, closing the door behind her. Her pale round face seemed flushed, and her eyes, behind the glasses, were afraid. She came over to him.

“Alex—”

“What do you want?” Alex recoiled away from her as she leaned over him. Then there was a click, and to his astonishment, his hands came free. She had unlocked the handcuffs! He stood up, wondering what was going on.

“Listen to me,” Vole said. The words were tumbling quickly and softly out of her yellow-painted lips. “We do not have much time. I am here to help you. I worked with your uncle—Herr Rider.” Alex stared at her in surprise. “Yes. I am on the same side as you.”

“But nobody told me—”

“It was better for you not to know.”

“But...” Alex was confused. “I saw you with the submarine. You knew what Sayle was doing...”

“There was nothing I could do. Not then. It's too hard for me to explain. We don't have the time to argue.

You want to stop him or no?”

“I need to find a phone.”

“All the phones in the house are coded. You cannot use them. But I have a mobile in my office.”

“Then let’s go.”

Alex was still suspicious. If Nadia Vole had known so much, why hadn’t she tried to stop Sayle before? On the other hand, she had released him—and Mr. Grin would be back any minute. He had no choice but to trust her. He followed her out of the room, around the corner, and up a flight of stairs to a landing with a statue of a naked woman, some Greek goddess, in the corner. Vole paused for a moment, resting her hand against the statue’s arm.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“I feel dizzy. You go on. It’s the first door on the left.”

Alex went past her, along the landing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her press down on the statue’s arm. The arm moved ... a lever. By the time he knew he had been tricked, it was too late. He yelled out as the floor underneath him swung around on a hidden pivot. He tried to stop himself falling, but there was nothing he could do. He crashed onto his back and slid down through the floor and into a black plastic tunnel, which corkscrewed beneath him. As he went, he heard Nadia Vole laugh triumphantly, and then he was gone, desperately trying to find a hold on the sides, wondering what would be at the end of his fall.

Five seconds later he found out. The corkscrew spat him out. He fell briefly through the air and splashed into cold water. For a moment he was blinded, fighting for air. Then he rose to the surface and found himself in a huge glass tank filled with water and rocks. That was when he realized, with horror, exactly where he was.

Vole had deposited him in the tank with the giant jellyfish: Herod Sayle’s Portuguese man-of-war. It was a miracle that he hadn’t crashed right into it. He could see it in the far corner of the tank, its dreadful tentacles with their hundreds of stinging cells, twisting and spiraling in the water. There was nothing between him and it. Alex fought back the panic, forced himself to keep still. He realized that thrashing about in the water would only create the current that would bring the creature over to him. The jellyfish had no eyes. It didn’t know he was there. It wouldn’t ... couldn’t attack.

But eventually it would reach him. The tank he was in was huge, at least fifteen feet deep and twenty or thirty feet long. The glass rose above the level of the water, far out of his reach. There was no way he could climb out. Looking down, through the water, he could see light. He realized he was looking into the room he had just left, Herod Sayle’s private office. There was a movement everything was vague and distorted through the rippling water—and the door opened. Two figures walked in. Alex could barely make them out, but he knew who they were. Fraulein Vole and Mr. Grin. They stood together in front of the tank. Vole was holding what looked like a mobile telephone in her hand.

“I hope you can hear me, Alex.” The German woman’s voice rang out from a speaker somewhere above his head. “I am sure you will have seen by now that there is no way out of the tank. You can tread water.

Maybe for one hour, maybe for two. Others have lasted for longer. What is the record, Mr. Grin?”

“Ire naaargh aah!”

“Five and a half hours. Yes. But soon you will get tired, Alex. You will drown. Or perhaps it will be faster and you will drift into the embrace of our friend. You see him ... no? It is not an embrace to be

desired. It will kill you. The pain, I think, will be beyond the imagination of a child. It is a pity, Alex Rider, that M16

chose to send you here. They will not be seeing you again.”

The voice clicked off. Alex kicked in the water, keeping his head above the surface, his eyes fixed on the jellyfish. There was another blurred movement on the other side of the glass. Mr. Grin had left the room.

But Vole had stayed behind. She wanted to watch him die.

Alex looked up. The tank was lit from above by a series of neon strips, but they were too high to reach.

Beneath him he heard a click and a soft, whirring sound. Almost at once he became aware that something had changed. The jellyfish was moving toward him! He could see the translucent cone with its dark mauve tip heading toward him. Underneath the creature, the tentacles slowly danced.

He swallowed water and realized he had opened his mouth to cry out. Vole must have turned on some sort of artificial current. That was what was making the jellyfish move. Desperately he kicked out with his feet, moving away from it, surging through the water on his back. One tentacle floated up and draped itself over his foot. If he hadn't been wearing sneakers, he would have been stung. Could the stinging cells penetrate his clothes? Almost certainly. His sneakers were the only protection he had.

He reached the back corner of the aquarium and paused there, one hand against the glass. He already knew that what Vole had said was true. If the jellyfish didn't get him, tiredness would. He had to fight every second to stay afloat, and sheer terror was sapping his strength. The glass. He pushed against it, wondering if he could break it. Perhaps there was a way... He checked the distance between himself and the jellyfish, took a deep breath and dived down to the bottom of the pool. He could see Nadia Vole, watching. Although she was a blur to him, he would be crystal clear to her. She didn't move, and Alex realized with despair that she had expected him to do just this.

He swam to the rocks and looked for one small enough to bring to the surface. But the rocks were too heavy. He found one about the size of his own head, but it refused to move. Vole hadn't tried to stop him because she knew that all the rocks were set in concrete. Alex was running out of breath. He twisted around and pushed himself up toward the surface, only seeing at the last second that the jellyfish had drifted above him.

He screamed, bubbles erupting out of his mouth. The tentacles were right over his head. Alex contorted his body and managed to stay down, flailing madly with his legs to propel himself sideways. His shoulder slammed into the nearest of the rocks and he felt the pain shudder through him. Clutching his arm in his hand, he backed into another corner and rose back up, gasping for breath as his head broke through the surface of the water.

He couldn't break the glass. He couldn't climb out. He couldn't avoid the touch of the jellyfish forever.

Although he had taken all the gadgets Smithers had given him, none of them could help him.

And then Alex remembered the zit cream. He let go of his arm and ran a finger up the side of the aquarium. The tank was an engineering marvel. Alex had no idea how much pressure the water was exerting on the huge plates of glass, but the whole thing was held together by a framework of iron

girders that fitted around the corners on both the inside and the outside of the glass, the metal faces held together by a series of rivets.

Treading water, he unzipped his pocket and took out the tube. Zit-Clean. For Healthier Skin. If Nadia Vole could see what he was doing, she must think he had gone mad. The jellyfish was drifting toward the back of the aquarium. Alex waited a few moments, then swam forward and dived for a second time.

There didn't seem to be very much of the cream given the thickness of the girders and the size of the tank, but Alex remembered the demonstration Smithers had given him, how little he had used. Would the cream even work underwater? There was no point worrying about that now; he had to give it a try. Alex held the tube against the metal corners at the front of the tank and did his best to squeeze a long line of cream all the way down the length of metal, using his other hand to rub it in around the rivets.

He kicked his feet, propelling himself across to the other side. He didn't know how long he would have before the cream took effect ... and anyway, Nadia Vole was already aware that something was wrong.

Alex saw that she had stood up again and was speaking into the mobile phone, perhaps calling for help.

He had used half the tube on one side of the tank. He used the second half on the other. The jellyfish was hovering above him, the tentacles reaching out as if to grab hold of him and stop him. How long had he been underwater? His heart was pounding. And what would happen when the metal broke?

He just had time to take one breath before he found out.

Even underwater, the cream burned through the rivets on the inside of the tank. The glass separated from the girders, and with nothing to hold it back, the huge pressure of water smashed it open like a door caught in the wind. Alex didn't see what happened next. He didn't have time to think. The world spun and he was thrown forward, as helpless as a cork in a waterfall. The next few seconds were a twisting nightmare of rushing water and exploding glass. Alex didn't dare open his eyes. He felt himself being hurled forward, slammed into something, then sucked back again. He was sure he had broken every bone in his body. Now he was underwater. He struggled to find air. His head broke through the surface, but even so, when he finally opened his mouth he was amazed he could actually breathe.

The front of the tank had blown off and a thousand gallons of water had cascaded into Herod Sayle's office.

The water had smashed the furniture and blown the windows out. It was still falling in torrents through the holes where the windows had been, the rest of it draining away through the floor. Bruised and dazed, Alex stood up, water curling around his ankles.

Where was the jellyfish?

He had been lucky that the two of them hadn't become tangled up in the sudden eruption of water. But it could still be close. There might still be enough water in Sayle's office to allow it to reach him. Alex backed into a corner of the room, his whole body taut. Then he saw it.

Nadia Vole had been less lucky than he. She had been standing in front of the glass when the girders broke and she hadn't been able to get out of the way in time. She was floating on her back, her legs

limp and broken. The Portuguese man-of-war was all over her. Part of it was sitting on her face and she seemed to be staring at him through the quivering mass of jelly. Her yellow lips were drawn back in an endless scream.

The tentacles were wrapped all around her, hundreds and hundreds of stinging cells clinging to her arms and legs and chest. Feeling sick, Alex backed away to the door and staggered out into the corridor.

An alarm had gone off. He only heard it now as sound and vision came back to him. The screaming of the siren shook him out of his dazed state. What time was it? Almost eleven o'clock. At least his watch was still working. But he was in Cornwall, at least a five-hour drive from London, and with the alarms sounding, the armed guards, and the razor wire, he'd never make it out of the complex. Find a telephone? No. Vole had probably been telling the truth when she said they were blocked. And, anyway, how could he get in touch with Alan Blunt or Mrs. Jones at this late stage? They'd already be at the Science Museum.

Just one hour left.

Outside, over the din of the alarms, Alex heard another sound. The splutter and roar of a propeller. He went over to the nearest window and looked out. Sure enough, the cargo plane that had been there when he arrived was about to take off.

Alex was soaking wet, battered, and almost exhausted. But he knew what he had to do.

He spun around and began to run.

ELEVEN O'CLOCK

ALEX BURST OUT of the house and stopped in the open air, taking stock of his surroundings. He was aware of alarms ringing, guards running toward him, and two cars, still some distance away, tearing up the main drive, heading for the house. He just hoped that although it was obvious something was wrong, nobody would yet know what it was. They shouldn't be looking for him—at least, not yet. That might give him the edge.

It looked like he was too late. Sayle's private helicopter had already gone. Only the cargo plane was left. If Alex was going to reach the Science Museum in London in the fifty-nine minutes left to him, he had to be on it. But the cargo plane was already in motion, rolling slowly away from its chocks. In a minute or two it would go through the preflight tests. Then it would take off.

Alex looked around and saw an open-topped army jeep parked on the drive near the front door. There was a guard standing next to it, a cigarette slipping out of his hand, looking around to see what was happening but looking the wrong way. Perfect. Alex sprinted across the gravel. He had brought a weapon from the house. One of Sayle's harpoon guns had floated past him just as he left the room and he'd snatched it up, determined at last to have something he could use to defend himself. It would be easy enough to shoot the guard right now. A harpoon in the back and the jeep would be his. But Alex knew he couldn't do it.

Whatever Alan Blunt and M16 wanted to turn him into, he wasn't ready to shoot in cold blood. Not for his country. Not even to save his own life.

The guard looked up as Alex approached and fumbled for the pistol in a holster at his belt. He never made it. Alex used the handle of the harpoon gun, swinging it around and up to hit him, hard, under the chin.

The guard crumpled, the pistol falling out of his hand. Alex grabbed it and leaped into the jeep, grateful to see the keys were in the ignition. He turned them and heard the engine start up. He knew how to drive.

That was something else Ian Rider had made sure he'd learned ... as soon as his legs were long enough to reach the pedals. The other cars were closing in on him. They must have seen him attack the guard.

Meanwhile, the plane had wheeled around and was already taxiing up to the start of the runway.

He wasn't going to reach it in time.

Maybe it was the danger closing in from all sides that had sharpened his senses. Maybe it was his close escape from so many dangers before. But Alex didn't even have to think. He knew what to do, as if he had done it a dozen times before. Maybe the training he'd been given had been more effective than he'd thought.

He reached into his pocket and took out the yo-yo that Smithers had given him. There was a metal stud on the belt he was wearing and he slammed the yo-yo against it, feeling it click into place, as it had been designed to. Then, as quickly as he could, he tied the end of the nylon cord around the bolt of the harpoon.

Finally, he tucked the pistol he had taken from the guard into the back of his trousers. He was ready.

The plane was facing down the runway. Its propellers were at full speed.

Alex wrenched the gear into first, released the hand brake, and gunned the jeep forward, shooting over the drive and onto the grass, heading for the airstrip. At the same time there was a chatter of machine-gun fire.

He yanked down on the steering wheel and twisted away as his wing mirror exploded and a spray of bullets slammed into the windshield and door. The two cars that he had seen coming up the main drive had wheeled around to come up behind him. Each of them had a guard in the backseat, leaning out of the window, firing at him. And they were getting closer.

Alex tried to go faster, but it was already too late. The two cars had reached him, and for a horrible second, he found himself sandwiched between them, one on each side. He was only inches away from the guards.

Looking left and right, he could see into the barrels of their machine guns. There was only one thing to do.

He slammed his foot on the brake, ducking at the same time. The jeep skidded to a halt and the other two cars flashed past him. There was a chatter as both machine guns opened fire. Alex looked up.

The two guards had squeezed their triggers simultaneously. They had both been aiming at him, but with the jeep suddenly out of their sights, they had ended up firing at each other. There was a yell. One of the cars lost control and crashed into a tree, metalwork crumpling against wood. The other screeched to a halt, reversed, then turned to come after him.

Alex slammed the car back into first gear and set off again. Where was the plane? With a groan, he saw that it had begun rolling down the runway. It was still moving slowly but was rapidly picking up speed. Alex hit the tarmac and followed.

His foot was pressed down, the gas pedal against the floor. The jeep was doing about seventy, but it wasn't fast enough. And straight ahead of him, the way was blocked. Two more cars had arrived on the runway.

More guards with machine guns balanced themselves, half leaning out of the windows. They had a clear shot. There was nothing to stop them from hitting him. Unless ...

He turned the steering wheel and yelled out as the jeep spun across the runway, behind the plane. Now he had the plane between him and the approaching cars. He was safe. But only for a few more seconds. The plane was about to leave the ground. Alex saw the front wheel separate itself from the runway. He glanced in his mirror. The car that had chased him from the house was right on his tail. He had nowhere left to go.

One car behind him. Two more ahead. The plane was now in the air, the back wheels lifting off. The guards taking aim. Everything at seventy miles an hour.

Alex let go of the steering wheel, grabbed the harpoon gun, and fired. The harpoon flashed through the air.

The yo-yo attached to Alex's belt spun, trailing out thirty yards of specially designed advanced nylon cord.

The pointed head of the harpoon buried itself in the underbelly of the plane. Alex felt himself almost being torn in half as he was yanked out of the jeep on the end of the cord. In seconds he was forty, fifty yards above the runway, dangling underneath the plane. His jeep swerved, out of control. The two oncoming cars tried to avoid it—and failed. Both of them hit it in a three-way head-on collision. There was an explosion, a ball of flame and a fist of gray smoke that followed Alex up as if trying to seize him. A moment later there was another explosion. The third car had been traveling too fast. It plowed into the burning wrecks, flipped over, and continued, screeching along the runway on its back before it too burst into flames.

Alex saw little of this. He was suspended underneath the plane by a single thin white cord, twisting around and around as he was carried ever farther into the air. The wind was rushing past him, battering his face and deafening him. He couldn't even hear the propellers, just above his head. The belt was cutting into his waist. He could hardly breathe. Desperately, he scrabbled for the yo-yo and found the control he wanted. A single button. He pressed it and the tiny powerful motor inside the yo-yo began to turn. The yo-yo rotated on his belt, pulling in the cord. Very slowly, an inch at a time, Alex was drawn up toward the plane.

He had aimed the harpoon accurately. There was a door at the back of the plane, and when he turned off the engine mechanism in the yo-yo, he was close enough to reach out for the handle. He wondered who was flying the plane and where he was going. The pilot must have seen the destruction down on the runway, but he couldn't have heard the harpoon. He couldn't know he'd picked up an extra passenger.

Opening the door was harder than Alex thought. He was still dangling under the plane and every time he got close to the handle the wind drove him back. The current was tearing into his eyes and Alex could hardly see. Twice his fingers found the metal handle, only to be pulled away before he could turn it. The third time he managed to get a better grip, but it still took all his strength to yank the handle down.

The door swung open and he clambered into the hold. He took one last look down. The runway was already a thousand feet below. There were two fires raging, but at this distance, they seemed no more than match heads. Alex unplugged the yo-yo, freeing himself. Then he reached into the waistband of his trousers and took out the gun.

The plane was empty apart from a couple of bundles that Alex vaguely recognized. There was a single pilot at the controls, and something on his instrumentation must have told him that the door was open because he suddenly twisted around. Alex found himself face-to-face with Mr. Grin.

“Warg?” the butler muttered.

Alex raised the gun. He wondered if he would have the courage to use it. But he wasn't going to let Mr. Grin know that. “All right, Mr. Grin,” he shouted above the noise of the propeller and the howl of the wind. “You may not be able to talk, but you'd better listen. I want you to fly this plane to London. We're going to the Science Museum in South Kensington and we've got to be there in less than an hour. And if you think you're trying to trick me, I'll put a bullet in you. Do you understand?”

Mr. Grin said nothing.

Alex fired the gun. The bullet slammed into the floor just beside Mr. Grin's foot. Mr. Grin stared at Alex, then nodded slowly.

He reached out and turned the joystick. The plane dipped and began to head north.

TWELVE O'CLOCK

LONDON APPEARED.

Suddenly the clouds rolled back and the late morning sun brought the whole city, shining, into view. There was Battersea Power Station, standing proud with its four great chimneys still intact, even though much of its roof had long ago been eaten away. Behind it, Battersea Park appeared as a square of dense green bushes and trees that were making a last stand, fighting back the urban spread. In the far distance the Millennium Wheel perched like a fabulous silver coin, balancing effortlessly on its rim. And all around it London crouched; gas towers and apartment blocks, endless rows of shops and houses, roads, railways, and bridges stretching away on both sides, separated only by the bright silver crack in the landscape that was the River Thames.

Alex saw all this with a clenched stomach, looking out through the open door of the aircraft. He'd had fifty minutes to think about what he had to do. Fifty minutes while the plane droned over Cornwall and Devon, then Somerset and the Salisbury Plains before reaching the North Downs and on toward Windsor and London.

When he had got into the plane, he had intended to use the radio to call the police or anyone else who might be listening. But seeing Mr. Grin at the controls had changed all that. He remembered how fast the man had been when he encountered him outside the bedroom. He knew he was safe enough in the cargo area, with Mr. Grin strapped into the pilot seat at the front of the plane. But he didn't dare get any closer.

Even with the gun it would be too dangerous.

He had thought of forcing Mr. Grin to land the plane at Heathrow. The radio had started squawking the moment they'd entered London airspace and had only stopped when Mr. Grin turned it off. But that would never have worked. By the time they reached the airport, touched down, and coasted to a halt, it would be far too late.

And then, sitting hunched up in the cargo area, Alex had recognized the two bundles lying on the floor next to him. They had told him exactly what he had to do.

"Eeerg!" Mr. Grin said. He twisted around in his seat, and for the last time, Alex saw the hideous smile that the circus knife had torn through his cheeks.

"Thanks for the ride," Alex said, and jumped out of the open door.

The bundles were parachutes. Alex had checked them out and strapped one onto his back when they were still over Reading. He was glad that he'd spent a day on parachute training with the SAS, although this flight had been even worse than the one he'd endured over the Welsh valleys. This time there was no static line. There had been no one to reassure him that his parachute was properly packed. If he could have thought of any other way to reach the Science Museum in the seven minutes that he had left, he would have taken it. There was no other way. He knew that. So he had jumped.

Once he was over the threshold, it wasn't so bad. There was a moment of dizzying confusion as the wind hit him once again. He closed his eyes and forced himself to count to three. Pull too early and the parachute might snag on the plane's tail. Even so, his hand was clenched and he had barely

reached three before he was pulling with all his strength. The parachute blossomed open above him and he was jerked back upward, the harness cutting into his armpits and sides.

They had been flying at ten thousand feet. When Alex opened his eyes, he was surprised by his sense of calm. He was dangling in the air, underneath a comforting canopy of white silk. He felt as if he wasn't moving at all. Now that he had left the plane, the city seemed even more distant and unreal. It was just him, the sky, and London. He was almost enjoying himself.

And then he heard the plane coming back.

It was already a mile or more away, but now he saw it bank steeply to the right, making a sharp turn. The engines rose, the plane leveled out, and it headed straight toward him. Mr. Grin wasn't going to let him get away so easily. As the plane drew closer and closer, he could imagine the man's never-ending smile behind the window of the cockpit. Mr. Grin intended to steer the plane straight into him, to cut him to shreds in midair.

But Alex had been expecting it.

He reached down and took the Game Boy out of his trouser pocket. This time there was no game cartridge in it, but he had slipped Bomber Boy out a long time ago and slid it across the floor of the empty cargo plane. That was where it was now. Just behind Mr. Grin's seat. A smoke bomb. Set off by remote control.

He pressed the start button three times.

Inside the plane the cartridge exploded, releasing a cloud of acrid yellow smoke. The smoke billowed out through the hold, curling against the windows, trailing out of the open door. Mr. Grin vanished, completely surrounded by smoke. The plane wobbled, then plunged down.

Alex watched the plane dive. He could imagine Mr. Grin blinded, fighting for control. The plane began to twist, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The engines whined. Now it was heading straight for the ground, howling through the sky. Yellow smoke trailed out in its wake. At the last minute Mr. Grin managed to bring up the nose again. But it was much too late. The plane smashed into what looked like a deserted piece of dock land near the River Thames and disappeared in a ball of flame.

Alex looked at his watch. Three minutes to twelve.

He was still thousands of feet in the air, and unless he landed on the very doorstep of the Science Museum, he wasn't going to make it. Grabbing hold of the ropes, using them to steer himself, he tried to work out the fastest way down.

Inside the East Hall of the Science Museum, Herod Sayle was coming to the end of his speech. The entire chamber had been transformed for the great moment when the Stormbreakers would be brought on-line.

The room was caught between old and new, between stone colonnades and stainless steel floors, between the very latest in high tech and old curiosities from the Industrial Revolution.

A podium had been set up in the center for Sayle, the prime minister, his press secretary, and the minister of state for education. In front of them were twelve rows of chairs—for journalists, teachers, invited friends.

Alan Blunt was in the front row, as emotionless as ever. Mrs. Jones, dressed in black with a large

brooch on her lapel, was next to him. On either side television towers had been constructed with cameras focusing in as Sayle spoke. The speech was being broadcast live to schools throughout the country and it would also be shown on the evening news. The hall was packed with another two or three hundred people, standing on first- and second-floor galleries, looking down on the podium from all sides. As Sayle spoke, tape recorders turned and lightbulbs flashed. Never before had a private individual made so generous a gift to the nation.

This was an event. History in the making.

“...it is the prime minister, and the prime minister alone who is responsible for what is about to happen,”

Sayle was saying. “And I hope that tonight, when he reflects on what has happened today throughout this country, that he will remember our days together at school and everything he did at that time. I think tonight the country will know him for the man he is. One thing is sure. This is a day you will never forget.”

He bowed. There was a scattering of applause. The prime minister glanced at his press secretary, puzzled.

The press secretary shrugged with barely concealed rudeness. The prime minister took his place in front of the microphone.

“I’m not quite sure how to respond to that,” he joked, and all the journalists laughed. The government had such a large majority that they knew it was in their best interests to laugh at the prime minister’s jokes. “I’m glad that Mr. Sayle has such happy memories of our school days together and I’m glad that the two of us, together, today, can make such a vital difference to our nation’s schools.”

Herod Sayle gestured at a table slightly to one side of the podium. On the table was a Stormbreaker computer and, next to it, a mouse. “This is the master control,” he said. “Click on the mouse and all the computers will come on-line.”

“Right.” The prime minister lifted his finger and adjusted his position so that the cameras could get his best profile. Somewhere outside the museum, a clock struck twelve.

Alex heard the clock from about five hundred feet up, with the roof of the Science Museum rushing toward him.

He had seen the building just after the plane had crashed. It hadn’t been easy finding it, with the city spread out like a three-dimensional map right underneath him. On the other hand, he had lived his whole life in West London and had visited the museum often enough. First he had seen the Victorian pile that was Albert Hall. Directly south of it was a tall white tower surmounted by a green dome: Imperial College. As Alex dropped, he seemed to be moving faster. The whole city had become a fantastic jigsaw puzzle and he knew he only had seconds to piece it together. A wide, extravagant building with churchlike towers and windows. That had to be the Natural History Museum. The Natural History Museum was on Cromwell Road. How did you get from there to the Science Museum? Of course, turn left at the lights up Exhibition Road.

And there it was. Alex pulled at the parachute, guiding himself toward it. How small it looked compared to the other landmarks, a rectangular building jutting in from the main road with a flat gray roof and, next to it, a series of arches, the sort of thing you might see on a railway station or perhaps

an enormous conservatory. They were a dull orange in color, curving one after the other. It looked as if they were made of glass. Alex could land on the flat roof. Then all he would have to do was look through the curved one.

He still had the gun he had taken from the guard. He could use it to warn the prime minister. If he had to, he figured, he could use it to shoot Herod Sayle.

Somehow he managed to maneuver himself over the museum. But it was only as he fell the last five hundred feet, as he heard the clock strike twelve, that he realized two things. He was falling much too fast.

And he had missed the flat roof.

In fact, the Science Museum has two roofs. The original is Georgian and made of wired glass. But sometime recently it must have leaked because the curators constructed a second roof of plastic sheeting over the top.

This was the orange roof that Alex had seen.

He crashed into it with both feet at about thirty miles per hour. The roof shattered. He continued straight through, into an inner chamber, just missing a network of steel girders and maintenance ladders. He barely had time to register what looked like a brown carpet, stretched out over the curving surface below. Then he hit it and tore through that too. It was no more than a thin cover, designed to keep the light and dust off the glass that it covered. With a yell, Alex smashed through the glass. At last his parachute caught on a beam.

He jerked to a halt, swinging in midair inside the East Hall.

This was what he saw.

Far below him, all around him, three hundred people had stopped and were staring up at him in shock.

There were more people sitting on chairs directly underneath him and some of them had been hit. There was blood and broken glass. A bridge made of green glass slats stretched across the hall. There was a futuristic information desk and in front of it, at the very center of everything, was a makeshift stage. He saw the Stormbreaker first. Then, with a sense of disbelief, he recognized the prime minister standing, slack jawed, next to Herod Sayle.

Alex hung in the air, dangling at the end of the parachute. As the last pieces of glass fell and disintegrated on the terra-cotta floor, movement and sound returned to the East Hall in an ever-widening wave.

The security men were the first to react. Anonymous and invisible when they needed to be, they were suddenly everywhere, appearing from behind colonnades, from underneath the television towers, running across the green bridge, guns in hands that had been empty a second before. Alex had also drawn his own gun, pulling it out from the waistband of his trousers. Maybe he could explain why he was here before Sayle or the prime minister activated the Stormbreakers. But he doubted it. Shoot first and ask questions later was a line from a bad film. But even bad films are sometimes right.

He emptied the gun.

The bullets echoed around the room, surprisingly loud. Now people were screaming, the journalists

punching and pushing as they fought for cover. The first bullet smashed into the information desk. The second hit the prime minister in the hand, his finger less than an inch away from the mouse. The third hit the mouse, blowing it into fragments. The fourth hit an electrical connection, disintegrating the plug and short-circuiting it. Sayle had dived forward, determined to click on the mouse himself. The fifth and the sixth bullets hit him.

As soon as Alex had fired the last bullet, he dropped the gun, letting it clatter to the floor below, and held up the palms of his hands. He felt ridiculous, hanging there from the ceiling, his arms outstretched. But there were already a dozen guns pointing at him and he had to show them that he was no longer armed, that they didn't need to shoot. Even so, he braced himself, waiting for the security men to open fire. He could almost imagine the hail of bullets tearing into him. As far as they were concerned, he was some sort of crazy terrorist who had just parachuted into the Science Museum and taken six shots at the prime minister. It was their job to kill him. It was what they'd been trained for.

But the bullets never came. All the security men were equipped with radio microphones, and in the front row, Mrs. Jones had control. The moment she had recognized Alex she had been speaking urgently into her brooch.

“Don't shoot! Repeat—don't shoot! Await my command!”

On the podium, a plume of gray smoke rose out of the side of the broken, useless Stormbreaker. Two security men had rushed to the prime minister, who was clutching his wrist, blood dripping out of his hand. The photographers and journalists had begun to shout questions. Their cameras were flashing and the television cameras too had been swung around to focus in on the figure swaying high above. More security men were moving to seal off the exits, following orders from Mrs. Jones, while Alan Blunt looked on, for once in his life out of his depth.

But there was no sign of Herod Sayle. The head of Sayle Enterprises had been shot twice, but somehow he had disappeared.

YASSEN

YOU SLIGHTLY SPOILED things by shooting the prime minister,” Alan Blunt said. “But all in all you’re to be congratulated, Alex. You not only lived up to our expectations. You way exceeded them.”

It was late afternoon the following day, and Alex was sitting in Blunt’s office at the Royal & General building on Liverpool Street wondering just why, after everything he had done for them, the head of M16

had to sound quite so much like the principal of a second-rate private school giving him a good report.

Mrs. Jones was sitting next to him. Alex had refused her offer of a peppermint, although he was beginning to realize it was all the reward he was going to get.

She spoke now for the first time since he had come into the room. “You might like to know about the clearing-up operation.”

“Sure...”

She glanced at Blunt, who nodded. “First of all, don’t expect to read the truth about any of this in the newspapers,” she began. “We put a D-notice on it, which means nobody is allowed to print anything. Of course, the ceremony at the Science Museum was being televised live, but fortunately we were able to cut the transmission before the cameras could focus on you. In fact, nobody knows that it was a fourteen-year-old boy who caused all the chaos.”

“And we plan to keep it that way,” Blunt muttered.

“Why?” Alex didn’t like the sound of that.

Mrs. Jones dismissed the question. “The newspapers had to print something, of course,” she went on. “The story we’ve put out is that Sayle was attacked by a hitherto unknown terrorist organization and that he’s gone into hiding...”

“Where is Sayle?” Alex asked.

“We don’t know. But we’ll find him. There’s nowhere on earth he can hide from us.”

“Okay.” Alex sounded doubtful.

“As for the Stormbreakers, we’ve already announced that there’s a dangerous product fault and that anyone turning them on could get electrocuted. It’s embarrassing for the government, of course, but they’ve all been recalled and we’re bringing them in now. Fortunately, Sayle was so fanatical that he programmed them so that the smallpox virus could only be released by the prime minister at the Science Museum. You managed to destroy the trigger, so even the few schools that have tried to start up their computers haven’t been affected.”

“It was very close,” Blunt said. “We’ve analyzed a couple of samples. It’s lethal. Worse even than the stuff Iraq was brewing up in the Gulf War.”

“Do you know who supplied it?” Alex asked.

Blunt coughed. “No.”

“How about the submarine that I saw?”

“Forget about the submarine.” It was obvious that Blunt didn’t want to talk about it. “You can just be sure that we’ll make all the necessary inquiries...”

“What about Yassen Gregorovich?” Alex asked.

Mrs. Jones took over. “We’ve closed down the plant at Port Tallon,” she said. “We already have most of the personnel under arrest. It’s unfortunate though that we weren’t able to talk to either Nadia Vole or the man you knew as Mr. Grin.”

“He never talked much, anyway,” Alex said.

“It was lucky that his plane crashed into a building site,” Mrs. Jones went on. “Nobody else was killed. As for Yassen, I imagine he’ll disappear. From what you’ve told us, it’s clear that he wasn’t actually working for Sayle. He was working for the people who were sponsoring Sayle ... and I doubt they’ll be very pleased with him. Yassen is probably on the other side of the world already. But one day, perhaps, we’ll find him.

We’ll never stop looking.”

There was a long silence. It seemed that the two spymasters had said all they wanted. But there was one question that nobody had tackled.

“What happens to me?” Alex asked.

“You go back to school,” Blunt replied.

Mrs. Jones took out an envelope and handed it to Alex.

“A check?” Alex asked.

“It’s a letter from a doctor, explaining that you’ve been away for three weeks with the flu. Very bad flu.

And if anyone asks, he’s a real doctor. You shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“You’ll continue to live in your uncle’s house,” Blunt said. “That housekeeper of yours, Jack Whatever.

We’ll get her visa renewed and she’ll continue to look after you. And that way we’ll know where you are if we need you again.”

Need you again. The words chilled Alex more than anything that had happened to him in the past three weeks. “You’ve got to be kidding,” he said.

“No.” Blunt gazed at him quite coolly. “It’s not my habit to make jokes.”

“You’ve done very well, Alex,” Mrs. Jones said, trying to sound more conciliatory. “The prime minister himself asked us to pass on his thanks to you. And the fact of the matter is that it could be wonderfully useful to have someone as young as you—”

“As talented as you—” Blunt cut in.

“—available to us from time to time.” She held up a hand to ward off any argument. “Let’s not talk

about it now,” she said. “But if ever another situation arises, maybe we can talk about it then.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Alex looked from one to the other. These weren’t people who were going to take no for an answer. In their own way, they were both as charming as Mr. Grin. “Can I go?” he asked.

“Of course you can,” Mrs. Jones said. “Would you like someone to drive you home?”

“No, thanks.” Alex got up. “I’ll find my own way.”

He should have been feeling better. As he took the elevator down to the ground floor, he reflected that he’d saved thousands of schoolchildren, he’d beaten Herod Sayle, and he hadn’t been killed or even badly hurt.

So what was there to be unhappy about? The answer was simple. Blunt had forced him into this. In the end, the big difference between him and James Bond wasn’t a question of age. It was a question of loyalty.

In the old days, spies had done what they’d done because they loved their country, because they believed in what they were doing. But he’d never been given a choice. Nowadays, spies weren’t employed. They were used.

He came out of the building, meaning to walk up to the tube station, but just then a cab drove along and he flagged it down. He was too tired for public transport. He glanced at the driver, huddled over the wheel in a horribly knitted, homemade cardigan, and slumped onto the backseat.

“Cheyne Walk, Chelsea,” Alex said.

The driver turned around. He was holding a gun. His face was paler than it had been the last time Alex saw it, and the pain of two bullet wounds was drawn all over it, but—impossibly—it was Herod Sayle.

“If you move, you bliddy child, I will shoot you,” Sayle said. His voice was pure venom. “If you try anything, I will shoot you. Sit still. You’re coming with me.”

The doors clicked shut, locking automatically. Herod Sayle turned around and drove off, down Liverpool Street, heading for the City.

Alex didn’t know what to do. He was certain that Sayle planned to shoot him, anyway. Why else would he have taken the huge chance of driving up to the very door of M16 headquarters in London? He thought about trying the window, perhaps trying to get the attention of another car at a traffic light. But it wouldn’t work. Sayle would turn around and kill him. The man had nothing left to lose.

They drove for ten minutes. It was a Saturday and the City was closed. The traffic was light. Then Sayle pulled up in front of a modern, glass-fronted skyscraper with an abstract statue—two oversized bronze walnuts on a slab of concrete—outside the front door.

“You will get out of the car with me,” Sayle commanded. “You and I will walk into the building. If you think about running, remember that this gun is pointing at your spine.”

Sayle got out of the car first. His eyes never left Alex. Alex guessed that the two bullets must have hit him in the left arm and shoulder. His left hand was hanging limp. But the gun was in his right hand. It was perfectly steady, aimed at Alex’s lower back.

“In...”

The building had swing doors and they were open. Alex found himself in a marble-clad hall with leather sofas and a curving reception desk. There was nobody here either. Sayle gestured with the gun and he walked over to a bank of elevators. One of them was waiting. He got in.

“The twenty-ninth floor,” Sayle said.

Alex pressed the button. “Are we going up for the view?” he asked.

Sayle nodded. “You make all the bliddy jokes you want,” he said. “But I’m going to have the last laugh.”

They stood in silence. Alex could feel the pressure in his ears as the elevator rose higher and higher. Sayle was staring at him, his damaged arm tucked into his side, supporting himself against one wall. Alex thought about attacking him. If he could just get the element of surprise. But, no ... they were too close.

And Sayle was coiled up like a spring.

The elevator slowed down and the doors opened. Sayle waved with the gun. “Turn left. You’ll come to a door. Open it.”

Alex did as he was told. The door was marked HELIPAD. A flight of concrete steps led up. Alex glanced at Sayle. Sayle nodded. “Up.”

They climbed the steps and reached another door with a push bar. Alex pressed it and went through. He was back outside, thirty floors up on a flat roof with a radio mast and a tall metal fence running around the perimeter. He and Sayle were standing on the edge of a huge cross, painted in red paint. Looking around, he could see right across the city to Canary Wharf and beyond. It had seemed a quiet spring day when Alex left the Royal & General offices. But up here the wind streaked past and the clouds boiled.

“You ruined everything!” Sayle howled. “How did you do it? How did you trick me? I’d have beaten you if you’d been a man! But they had to send a boy! A bliddy schoolboy! Well, it isn’t over yet! I’m leaving England. That’s why I brought you here. I wanted you to see!”

Sayle nodded and Alex turned around to see that there was a helicopter hovering in the air behind him.

Where had it come from? It was painted red and yellow, a light, single-engine aircraft with a figure in dark glasses and helmet hunched over the controls. The helicopter was a Colibri EC 1 20B, one of the quietest in the world. It swung around over him, its blades beating at the air.

“That’s my ticket out of here!” Sayle continued. “They’ll never find me! And one day I’ll be back. Next time, nothing will go wrong. And you won’t be here to stop me. This is the end for you! This is where you die!”

There was nothing Alex could do. Sayle raised the gun and took aim, his eyes wide, the pupils blacker than they had ever been, mere pinpricks in the bulging white.

There were two small explosive cracks.

Alex looked down, expecting to see blood. There was nothing. He couldn’t feel anything. Then Sayle staggered and fell onto his back. There were two gaping holes in his chest.

The helicopter landed in the center of the cross. The pilot got out.

Still holding the gun that had killed Herod Sayle, he walked over and examined the body, prodding it with his shoe. Satisfied, he nodded to himself, tucking the gun away. He had switched off the engine of the helicopter and behind him the blades slowed down and stopped. Alex stepped forward. The man seemed to notice him for the first time.

“You’re Yassen Gregorovich,” Alex said.

The Russian nodded. It was impossible to tell what was going on in his head. His clear blue eyes gave nothing away.

“Why did you kill him?” Alex asked.

“Those were my instructions.” There was no trace of an accent in his voice. He spoke softly, reasonably.

“He had become an embarrassment. It was better this way.”

“Not better for him.”

Yassen shrugged.

“What about me?” Alex asked.

The Russian ran his eyes over Alex, as if weighing him up. “I have no instructions concerning you,” he said.

“You’re not going to shoot me too?”

“Do I have any need to?”

There was a pause. The two of them gazed at each other over the corpse of Herod Sayle.

“You killed Ian Rider,” Alex said. “He was my uncle.”

Yassen shrugged. “I kill a lot of people.”

“One day I’ll kill you.”

“A lot of people have tried.” Yassen smiled. “Believe me,” he said, “it would be better if we didn’t meet again. Go back to school. Go back to your life. And the next time they ask you, say no. Killing is for grown-ups and you’re still a child.”

He turned his back on Alex and climbed into the cabin. The blades started up, and a few seconds later, the helicopter rose back into the air. For a moment it hovered at the side of the building. Behind the glass, Yassen raised his hand. A gesture of friendship? A salute? Alex raised his hand. The helicopter spun away.

Alex stood where he was, watching it, until it had disappeared in the dying light.

THE END

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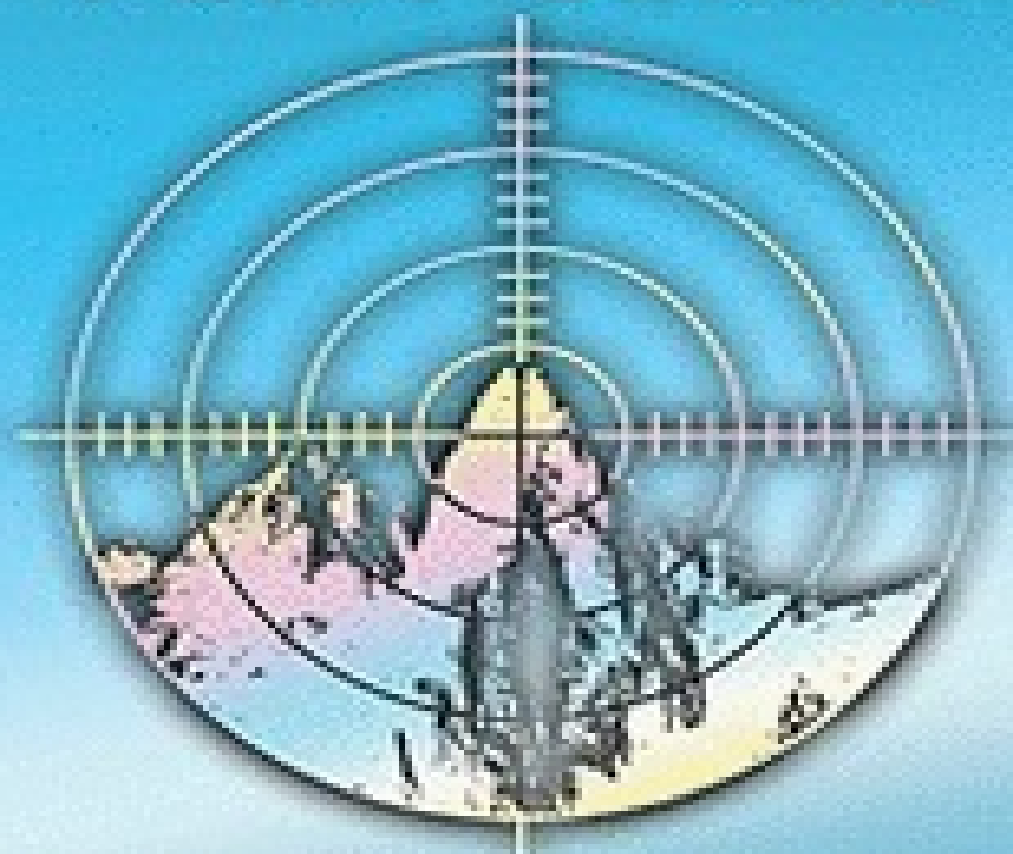
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YASSEN

Saving the world one mission at a time

ALEX RIDER

POINT BLANK



ANTHONY HOROWITZ

#1 New York Times bestselling author

Point Blank

Alex Rider [2]

Anthony Horowitz

Penguin USA (Paper) (2011)

From Publishers Weekly

Powerful, privileged and screwed up, 16 boys in a boarding school suddenly turn into model students. It's up to 14-year-old Alex Rider to find out why and to face the maniacal man who has engineered it all in a bid to take over the world in *Point Blank: An Alexander Rider Adventure* by Anthony Horowitz, the follow-up to last year's *Stormbreaker*.

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From School Library Journal

Gr 5-10-After two influential businessmen die in separate freak accidents, MI6, England's spy network, once again calls upon 14-year-old Alex Rider to infiltrate Point Blanc, a private school in the French Alps for out-of-control, wealthy teens. Armed only with his wits and some 007-type devices, he stumbles upon an evil mad scientist's plot to take over the world using clones as replacements for prominent sons. Spy gadgets, chase scenes, mysteries, and a cliff-hanger ending will keep even reluctant readers interested in the second novel in this series. Familiarity with the first novel is not necessary as the plot fills in past information when needed, but many students will want to go back and read *Stormbreaker* (Philomel, 2001) to see how Alex first became involved with MI6.

Kim Carlson, Monticello High School, IA

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GOING DOWN

MICHAEL J. ROSCOE was a careful man.

The car that drove him to work at quarter past seven each morning was a custom-made Mercedes with reinforced steel plates and bulletproof windows. His driver, a retired FBI agent, carried a Beretta subcompact automatic pistol and knew how to use it. There were just five steps from the point where the car stopped to the entrance of Roscoe Tower on New York's Fifth Avenue, but closed-circuit television cameras followed him every inch of the way. Once the automatic doors had slid shut behind him, a uniformed guard—also armed—watched as he crossed the foyer and entered his own private elevator.

The elevator had white marble walls, a blue carpet, a silver handrail, and no buttons. Roscoe pressed his hand against a small glass panel. A sensor read his fingerprints, verified them, and activated the elevator. The doors slid shut and the elevator rose to the sixtieth floor without stopping. Nobody else ever used it. Nor did it ever stop at any of the other floors in the building. At the same time it was traveling up, the receptionist in the lobby was on the telephone, letting his staff know that Mr. Roscoe was on his way.

Everyone who worked in Roscoe's private office had been handpicked and thoroughly vetted. It was impossible to see him without an appointment. Getting an appointment could take three months.

When you're rich, you have to be careful. There are cranks, kidnapers, terrorists—the desperate and the dispossessed. Michael J. Roscoe was the chairman of Roscoe Electronics and the ninth or tenth richest man in the world—and he was very careful indeed. Ever since his face had appeared on the front cover of Time magazine (‘The Electronics King’), he knew that he had become a visible target. When in public he walked quickly, with his head bent. His glasses had been chosen to hide as much as possible of his round, handsome face. His suits were expensive but anonymous. If he went to the theater or to dinner, he always arrived at the last minute, preferring not to hang around. There were dozens of different security systems in his life, and although they had once annoyed him, he had allowed them to become routine.

But ask any spy or security agent. Routine is the one thing that can get you killed. It tells the enemy where you're going and when you're going to be there. Routine was going to kill Michael J. Roscoe, and this was the day death had chosen to come calling.

Of course, Roscoe had no idea of this as he stepped out of the elevator that opened directly into his private office, a huge room occupying the corner of the building with floor-to-ceiling windows giving views in two directions: Fifth Avenue to the east, Central Park just a few blocks south. The two remaining walls contained a door, a low book shelf, and a single oil painting—a vase of flowers by Vincent van Gogh.

The black glass surface of his desk was equally uncluttered: a computer, a leather notebook, a telephone, and a framed photograph of a fourteen-year-old boy. As he took off his jacket and sat down, Roscoe found himself looking at the picture of the boy. Blond hair, blue eyes, and freckles. Paul Roscoe looked remarkably like his father had thirty years ago. Michael Roscoe was now fifty-two and beginning to show his age despite his year-round tan. His son was almost as tall as he was. The picture had been taken the summer before, on Long Island. They had spent the day sailing. Then

they'd had a barbecue on the beach. It had been one of the few happy days they'd ever spent together.

The door opened and his secretary came in. Helen Bosworth was English. She had left her home and, indeed, her husband to come and work in New York, and still loved every minute of it. She had been working in this office for eleven years, and in all that time she had never forgotten a detail or made a mistake.

,Good morning, Mr. Roscoe,' she said.

,Good morning, Helen.'

She put a folder on his desk. ,The latest figures from Singapore. Costings on the R- 15

Organizer. You have lunch with Senator Andrews at half past twelve. I've booked The Ivy.'

,Did you remember to call London?' Roscoe asked.

Helen Bosworth blinked. She never forgot anything, so why had he asked? ,I've spoke to Alan Blunt's office yesterday afternoon,' she said. Afternoon in New York would have been evening in London. ,Mr. Blunt was not available, but I've arranged a person-to-person call with you this afternoon. We can have it patched through to your car.'

,Thank you, Helen.'

,Shall I have your coffee sent in to you?'

,No, thank you, Helen. I won't have coffee today.'

Helen Bosworth left the room, seriously alarmed. No coffee? What next? Mr. Roscoe had begun his day with a double espresso for as long as she had known him. Could it be that he was ill? He certainly hadn't been himself recently—not since Paul had returned home from that school in the South of France. And this phone call to Alan Blunt in London! Nobody had ever told her who he was, but she had seen his name once in a file. He had something to do with military intelligence. MI6. What was Mr. Roscoe doing, talking to a spy?

Helen Bosworth returned to her office and soothed her nerves, not with coffee—she couldn't stand the stuff—but with a refreshing cup of English Breakfast tea. Something very strange was going on, and she didn't like it. She didn't like it at all.

Meanwhile, sixty floors below, a man had walked into the lobby area wearing gray overalls with an ID badge attached to his chest. The badge identified him as Sam Green, maintenance engineer with X-Press Elevators Inc. He was carrying a briefcase in one hand and a large silver toolbox in the other. He set them both down in front of the reception desk.

Sam Green was not his real name. His hair—black and a little greasy—was fake, as were his glasses, mustache, and uneven teeth. He looked fifty years old, but he was actually closer to thirty. Nobody knew the man's real name, but in the business that he was in, a name was the last thing he could afford. He was known merely as ,The Gentleman,' and he was one of the highest-paid and most successful contract killers in the world. He had been given his nickname because he always sent flowers to the families of his victims.

The lobby guard glanced at him.

,I'm here for the elevator,' he said. He spoke with a Bronx accent even though he had never spent

more than a week there in his life.

‘What about it?’ the guard asked. ‘You people were here last week.’

‘Yeah. Sure. We found a defective cable on elevator twelve. It had to be replaced, but we didn’t have the parts. So they sent me back.’ The Gentleman fished in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. ‘You want to call the head office? I’ve got my orders here.’

If the guard had called X-Press Elevators Inc., he would have discovered that they did indeed employ a Sam Green—although he hadn’t shown up for work in two days. This was because the real Sam Green was at the bottom of the Hudson River with a knife in his back and a twenty-pound block of concrete attached to his foot. But the guard didn’t make the call. The Gentleman had guessed he wouldn’t bother. After all, the elevators were always breaking down. There were engineers in and out all the time. What difference would one more make?

The guard jerked a thumb. ‘Go ahead,’ he said.

The Gentleman put away the letter, picked up his cases, and went over to the elevators.

There were a dozen servicing the skyscraper, plus a thirteenth for Michael J. Roscoe. Elevator number twelve was at the end. As he went in, a delivery boy with a parcel tried to follow.

‘Sorry,’ The Gentleman said. ‘Closed for maintenance.’ The doors slid shut. He was on his own. He pressed the button for the sixty-first floor.

He had been given this job only a week before. He’d had to work fast, killing the real maintenance engineer, taking his identity, learning the layout of Roscoe Tower, and getting his hands on the sophisticated piece of equipment he had known he would need. His employers wanted the multimillionaire eliminated as quickly as possible. More importantly, it had to look like an accident. For this, The Gentleman had demanded—and been paid—one hundred thousand dollars. The money was to be paid into a bank account in Switzerland; half now, half on completion.

The elevator door opened again. The sixty-first floor was used primarily for maintenance.

This was where the water tanks were housed, as well as the computers that controlled the heat, air-conditioning, security cameras, and elevators throughout the building. The Gentleman turned off the elevator, using the manual override key that had once belonged to Sam Green, then went over to the computers. He knew exactly where they were. In fact, he could have found them wearing a blindfold. He opened his briefcase. There were two sections to the case.

The lower part was a laptop computer. The upper lid was fitted with a number of drills and other tools, each of them strapped into place.

It took him fifteen minutes to cut his way into the Roscoe Tower mainframe and connect his own laptop to the circuitry inside. Hacking his way past the Roscoe security systems took a little longer, but at last it was done. He tapped a command into his keyboard. On the floor below, Michael J. Roscoe’s private elevator did something it had never done before. It rose one extra floor—to level sixty-one. The door, however, remained closed. The Gentleman did not need to get in.

Instead, he picked up the briefcase and the silver toolbox and carried them back into the same elevator he had taken from the lobby. He turned the override key and pressed the button for the fifty-ninth floor. Once again, he deactivated the elevator. Then he reached up and pushed. The top of the

elevator was a trapdoor that opened outward. He pushed the briefcase and the silver box ahead of him, then pulled himself up and climbed onto the roof of the elevator. He was now standing inside the main shaft of Roscoe Tower. He was surrounded on four sides by girders and pipes blackened with oil and dirt. Thick steel cables hung down, some of them humming as they carried their loads. Looking down, he could see a seemingly endless square tunnel illuminated only by the chinks of light from the doors that slid open and shut again as the other elevators arrived at various floors. Somehow the breeze had made its way in from the street, spinning dust that stung his eyes. Next to him was a set of elevator doors that, had he opened them, would have led him straight into Roscoe's office. Above these, over his head and a few yards to the right, was the underbelly of Roscoe's private elevator.

The toolbox was next to him, on the roof of the elevator. Carefully, he opened it. The sides of the case were lined with thick sponge. Inside, in the specialty molded space, was what looked like a complicated film projector, silver and concave with a thick glass lens. He took it out, then glanced at his watch. Eight thirty-five A.M. It would take him an hour to connect the device to the bottom of Roscoe's elevator, and a little more to ensure that it was working. He had plenty of time.

Smiling to himself, The Gentleman took out a power screwdriver and began to work.

At twelve o'clock, Helen Bosworth called on the telephone. , Your car is here, Mr. Roscoe. ' , Thank you, Helen. '

Roscoe hadn't done much that morning. He had been aware that only half his mind was on his work. Once again, he glanced at the photograph on his desk. Paul. How could things have gone so wrong between a father and a son? And what could have happened in the last few months, to make them so much worse?

He stood up, put his jacket on, and walked across his office, on his way to lunch with Senator Andrews. He often had lunch with politicians. They wanted either his money, his ideas—or him. Anyone as rich as Roscoe made for a powerful friend, and politicians need all the friends they can get.

He pressed the elevator button, and the doors slid open. He took one step forward.

The last thing Michael J. Roscoe saw in his life was the inside of his elevator with its white marble walls, blue carpet, and silver handrail. His right foot, wearing a black leather shoe that was handmade for him by a small shop in Rome, traveled down to the carpet and kept going—right through it. The rest of his body followed, tilting into the elevator and then through it. And then he was falling sixty floors to his death.

He was so surprised by what had happened, so totally unable to understand what *had* happened, that he didn't even cry out. He simply fell into the blackness of the elevator shaft, bounced twice off the walls, then crashed into the solid concrete of the basement, five hundred yards below.

The elevator remained where it was. It looked solid but, in fact, it wasn't there at all. What Roscoe had stepped into was a hologram, an image being projected into the empty space of the elevator shaft where the real elevator should have been. The Gentleman had programmed the door to open when Roscoe pressed the call button, and had quietly watched him step into oblivion. If the multimillionaire had managed to look up for a moment, he would have seen the silver hologram projector, beaming the image, a few yards above him. But a man getting into an elevator on his way to lunch does not look

up. The Gentleman had known this. And he was never wrong.

At 12:35, the chauffeur called up to say that Mr. Roscoe hadn't arrived at the car. Ten minutes later, Helen Bosworth alerted security, who began to search around the foyer of the building. At one o'clock, they called the restaurant. The senator was there, waiting for his lunch guest. But Roscoe hadn't shown up.

In fact, his body wasn't discovered until the next day, by which time the multimillionaire's disappearance had become the lead story on the news. A bizarre accident—that's what it looked like. Nobody could work out what had happened. Because by that time, of course, The Gentleman had reprogrammed the computer, removed the projector, and left everything as it should have been before quietly leaving the building.

Two days later, a man who looked nothing like a maintenance engineer walked into JFK

International Airport. He was about to board a flight for Switzerland. But first, he visited a flower shop and ordered a dozen black tulips to be sent to a certain address. The man paid with cash. He didn't leave a name.

BLUE SHADOW

THE WORST TIME TO FEEL alone is when you're in a crowd. Alex Rider was walking across the school yard, surrounded by hundreds of boys and girls his own age. They were all heading in the same direction, all wearing the same blue and gray uniform, all of them thinking probably much the same thoughts. The last lesson of the day had just ended. Homework, supper, and television would fill the remaining hours until bed. Another school day. So why did he feel so out of it, as if he were watching the last weeks of the spring term from the other side of a giant glass screen?

Alex jerked his backpack over one shoulder and continued toward the bike shed. The bag was heavy. As usual, it contained double homework ... French and history. He had missed three weeks of school and was working hard to catch up. His teachers had not been sympathetic. Nobody had said as much, but when he had finally returned with a doctor's letter (,a bad dose of flu with complications`) they had nodded and smiled and secretly thought him a little bit pampered and spoiled. On the other hand, they had to make allowances. They all knew that Alex had no parents, that he had been living with an uncle who had died in some sort of car accident. But even so. Three weeks in bed! Even his closest friends had to admit that was a bit much.

And he couldn't tell them the truth. He wasn't allowed to tell anyone what had really happened. That was the hell of it.

Alex looked around him at the children streaming through the school gates, some dribbling soccer balls, some on their cell phones. He looked at the teachers, curling themselves into their secondhand cars. At first, he had thought the whole school had somehow changed while he was away. But he knew now that what had happened was worse. Everything was the same. He was the one who had changed.

Alex was fourteen years old, an ordinary schoolboy in an ordinary West London school. Or he had been. Three weeks before, he had discovered that his uncle was a secret agent, working for MI6. The uncle—Ian Rider—had been murdered, and MI6 had forced Alex to take his place.

They had given him a crash course in Special Air Service survival techniques and sent him on a lunatic mission on the South Coast. He had been chased, shot at, and almost killed. And at the end of it he had been packed off and sent back to school as if nothing had happened. But first they had made him sign the Official Secrets Act. Alex smiled at the memory of it. He didn't need to sign anything. Who would have believed him anyway?

But it was the secrecy that was getting to him now. Whenever anyone asked him what he had been doing in the weeks he had been away, he had been forced to tell them that he had been in bed, reading, slouching around the house, whatever. Alex didn't want to boast about what he'd done, but he hated having to deceive his friends. It made him angry. MI6 hadn't just put him in danger. They'd locked his whole life in a filing cabinet and thrown away the key.

He had reached the bike shed. Somebody muttered a ,goodbye` in his direction and he nodded, then reached up to brush away the single strand of fair hair that had fallen over his eye. Sometimes he wished that the whole business with MI6 had never happened. But at the same time—he had to admit it—part of him wanted it all to happen again. Sometimes he felt that he no longer belonged in the safe, comfortable world of Brookland Comprehensive. Too much had changed. And at the end of the day,

anything was better than double homework.

He lifted his bike out of the shed, unlocked it, pulled the backpack over his shoulders, and prepared to ride away. That was when he saw the beaten-up white car. Back outside the school gates for the second time that week.

Everyone knew about the man in the white car.

He was in his twenties, bald-headed with two broken stumps where his front teeth should have been and five metal studs in his ear. He didn't advertise his name. When people talked about him, they called him Skoda, after the make of his car. But some said that his name was Jake and that he had once been to Brookland. If so, he had come back like an unwelcome ghost; here one minute, vanishing the next ... somehow always a few seconds ahead of any passing police car or overly inquisitive teacher.

Skoda sold drugs. He sold soft drugs, like pot and cigarettes, to the younger kids, and harder stuff to any of the older ones stupid enough to buy it. It seemed incredible to Alex that Skoda could get away with it so easily, dealing his little packets in broad daylight. But of course, there was a code of honor in the school. No one turned anyone in to the police, not even a rat like Skoda. And there was always the fear that if Skoda went down, some of the people he supplied—friends, classmates—might go with him.

Drugs had never been a huge problem at Brookland, but recently that had begun to change.

A clutch of seventeen-year-olds had started buying Skoda's goods, and like a stone dropped into a pool, the ripples had rapidly spread. There had been a spate of thefts, as well as one or two nasty bullying incidents—younger children being forced to bring in money for older ones.

The stuff Skoda was selling seemed to get more expensive the more you bought of it, and it hadn't been cheap at the start.

Alex watched as a heavy-shouldered boy with dark eyes and serious acne lumbered over to the car, paused by the open window, and then continued on his way. He felt a sudden spurt of pure loathing. The boy's name was Colin, and a year before, he had been hardworking and popular. These days, he was just avoided. Alex had never thought much about drugs, apart from knowing that he would never take them himself. But he could see that the man in the white car wasn't poisoning just a handful of dumb kids. He was poisoning the whole school.

A policeman on foot patrol appeared, walking toward the gate. A moment later, the white car was gone, black smut bubbling from a faulty exhaust. Alex was on his bike before he knew what he was doing, pedaling fast out of the yard and swerving around the school secretary, who also was on her way home.

„Not too fast, Alex!“ she called out, sighing when he ignored her. Miss Bedfordshire had always had a soft spot for Alex without knowing quite why. And she alone in the school had wondered if there hadn't been more to his absence than the doctor's note had suggested.

The white Skoda accelerated down the road, turning left and then right, and Alex thought he was going to lose it. But then it twisted through the maze of back streets that led up to the King's Road and hit the inevitable four o'clock traffic jam, coming to a halt about two hundred yards ahead.

The average speed of traffic in London is—at the start of the twenty-first century—slower than it was

in Victorian times. During normal working hours, any bicycle will beat any car on just about any journey at all. And Alex wasn't riding just any bike. He still had his Condor Junior Roadracer, handbuilt for him in the workshop that had been open for business on the same street in Holborn for more than fifty years. He'd recently had it upgraded with an integrated brake and gear lever system fitted to the handlebar, and he only had to flick his thumb to feel the bike click up a gear, the lightweight titanium sprockets spinning smoothly beneath him.

He caught up with the car just as it turned the corner and joined the rest of the traffic on the King's Road. He would just have to hope that Skoda was going to stay in the city, but somehow Alex didn't think it likely that he would travel too far. The drug dealer hadn't chosen Brookland Comprehensive as a target simply because he'd been there. It had to be somewhere in his general neighborhood—not too close to home but not too far either.

The lights changed and the white car jerked forward, heading west. Alex pedaled slowly, keeping a few cars behind, just in case Skoda happened to glance in his mirror. They reached the corner known as World's End, and suddenly the road was clear and Alex had to switch gears again and pedal hard to keep up. The car drove on, through Parson's Green and down toward Putney. Alex twisted from one lane to another, cutting in front of a taxi and receiving the blast of a horn as his reward. It was a warm day, and he could feel his French and history homework dragging down his back. How much farther were they going? And what would he do when they got there? Alex was beginning to wonder whether this had been a good idea when the car turned off and he realized they had arrived.

Skoda had pulled into a rough tarmac area, a temporary parking lot next to the River Thames, not far from Putney Bridge. Alex stayed on the bridge, allowing the traffic to roll past, and watched as the dealer got out of his car and began to walk. The area was being redeveloped, another block of prestigious apartments rising up to bruise the London skyline.

Right now the building was no more than an ugly skeleton of steel girders and prefabricated concrete slabs. It was surrounded by a swarm of men in hard hats. There were bulldozers, cement mixers, and, towering above them all, a huge, canary yellow crane. A sign read: RIVERVIEW HOUSE. And below it: ALL VISITORS REPORT TO THE SITE OFFICE.

Alex wondered if Skoda had some sort of business on the site. He seemed to be heading for the entrance. But then he turned off. Alex watched him, increasingly puzzled.

The building site was wedged in between the bridge and a cluster of modern buildings.

There was a pub, then what looked like a brand-new conference center, and finally a police station with a parking lot half filled with official cars. But right next to the building site, sticking out into the river, was a wooden jetty with two cabin cruisers and an old iron barge quietly rusting in the murky water. Alex hadn't noticed the jetty at first, but Skoda walked straight onto it, then climbed onto the barge. He found a door, opened it, and disappeared inside. Was this where he lived? It was already growing dark, and somehow Alex doubted he was about to set off on a pleasure cruise down the River Thames.

He got back on his bike and cycled slowly to the end of the bridge, and then down toward the parking lot. He left the bike and his backpack out of sight and continued on foot, moving more slowly as he approached the jetty. He wasn't afraid of being caught. This was a public place, and even if Skoda did reappear, there would be nothing he could do. But he was curious, just what was the dealer doing

on board a barge? It seemed a bizarre place to have stopped.

Alex still wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he wanted to have a look inside. Then he would decide.

The wooden jetty creaked under his feet as he stepped onto it. The barge was called *Blue Shadow*, but there was little blue left in the flaking paint, the rusty ironwork, and the dirty, oil-covered decks. The barge was about thirty yards long and very square with a single cabin in the center. It was lying low in the water, and Alex guessed that most of the living quarters would be underneath. He knelt down on the jetty and pretended to tie his shoelaces, hoping to look through the narrow, slanting windows. But all the curtains were drawn. What now?

The barge was moored on one side of the jetty. The two cabin cruisers were side by side on the other. Skoda wanted privacy—but he must also need light, and there would be no need to draw the curtains on the far side, with nothing there but the river. The only trouble was that to look in the other windows, Alex would have to climb onto the barge itself. He considered briefly. It had to be worth the risk. He was near enough to the building site. Nobody was going to try to hurt him in broad daylight.

He placed one foot on the deck, then slowly transferred his weight onto it. He was afraid that moving the barge would give him away. Sure enough, the barge dipped under his weight, but Alex had chosen his moment well. A police launch was sailing past, heading up the river and back into town. The barge bobbed naturally in its wake, and by the time it settled, Alex was on board, crouching next to the cabin door.

Now he could hear music coming from inside. The heavy beat of a rock band. He didn't want to do it, but he knew there was only one way to look in. He tried to find an area of the deck that wasn't too covered in oil, then lay flat on his stomach. Clinging on to the handrail, he lowered his head and shoulders over the side of the barge and shifted himself forward so that he was hanging almost upside down over the water.

He was right. The curtains on this side of the barge were open. Looking through the dirty glass of the window, he could see two men. Skoda was sitting on a bunk, smoking a cigarette.

There was a second man, blond-haired and ugly, with twisted lips and three days' stubble, wearing a torn sweatshirt and jeans, making a cup of coffee at a small stove. The music was coming from a boom box perched on a shelf. Alex looked around the cabin. Besides two bunks and the miniature kitchen, the barge offered no living accommodations at all. Instead, it had been converted for another purpose. Skoda and his friend had turned it into a floating laboratory.

There were two metal work surfaces, a sink, and a pair of electric scales. Everywhere there were test tubes and Bunsen burners, flasks, glass pipes, and measuring spoons. The whole place was filthy—obviously neither of the two men cared about hygiene—but Alex knew that he was looking into the heart of their operation. This was where they prepared the drugs they sold: cut them down, weighed them, and packaged them for delivery to local schools. It was an insane idea to put a drug factory on a boat, almost in the middle of London, and only a stone's throw away from a police station. But at the same time, it was a clever one. Who would have looked for it here?

The blond-haired man suddenly turned around, and Alex hooked his body up and slithered backward onto the deck. For a moment he was dizzy. Hanging upside down had made the blood drain into his

head. He took a couple of breaths, trying to collect his thoughts. It would be easy enough to walk over to the police station and tell the officer in charge what he had seen. The police could take over from there.

But something inside Alex rejected the idea. Maybe he would have done that a few months before: let someone else take care of it. But he hadn't cycled all this way just to call the police.

He thought back to his first sighting of the white car outside the school gates. He remembered his friend Colin shuffling over to it and felt once again a brief blaze of anger. This was something he wanted to do himself.

But what could he do? If the barge had been equipped with a plug, Alex would have pulled it out and sunk the entire thing. But of course it wasn't as easy as that. The barge was tied to the jetty by two thick ropes. He could untie them, but that wouldn't help either. The barge would drift away, but this was Putney. There were no whirlpools or waterfalls. Skoda could simply turn on the engine and cruise back again.

Alex looked around him. On the building site, the day's work was coming to an end. Some of the men were already leaving, and as he watched, he saw a trapdoor open about a hundred and fifty yards above him and a stocky man begin the long climb down from the top of the crane. Alex closed his eyes. A whole series of images suddenly flashed into his mind, like different sections of a jigsaw puzzle.

The barge. The building site. The police station. The crane with its big hook, dangling underneath the jib.

And the Blackpool amusement park. He'd gone there once with his housekeeper, Jack Starbright, and had watched as she won a teddy bear, hooking it out of a glass case and carrying it over to a chute.

Could it be done? Alex looked again, working out the angles. Yes. It probably could.

He stood up and crept back across the deck to the door that Skoda had entered. A length of wire was lying to one side, and he picked it up, then wound it several times around the handle of the door. He looped the wire over a hook in the wall and pulled it tight. The door was effectively locked. There was a second door at the back of the boat. Alex secured this one with his own bicycle padlock. As far as he could see, the windows were too narrow to crawl through.

There was no other way in or out.

He crept off the barge and back onto the jetty. Then he untied it, leaving the thick rope loosely curled up beside the metal pegs—the stanchions—that had secured it. The river was still. It would be a while before the barge drifted away.

He straightened up. Satisfied with his work so far, he began to run.

HOOKED

THE ENTRANCE TO THE BUILDING site was crowded with construction workers preparing to go home. Alex was reminded of Brookfield an hour earlier. Nothing really changed when you got older—except that maybe you weren't given homework. The men and women drifting out of the site were tired, in a hurry to be away. That was probably why none of them tried to stop Alex as he slipped in among them, walking purposefully as if he knew where he was going, as if he had every right to be there.

But the shift wasn't completely finished yet. Other workers were still carrying tools, stowing away machinery, packing up for the night. They all wore protective headgear, and seeing a pile of plastic helmets, Alex snatched one up and put it on. The great sweep of the block of apartments that was being built loomed up ahead of him. To pass through it, he was forced into a narrow corridor between two scaffolding towers. Suddenly a heavy-set man in white overalls stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

,Where are you going?' he demanded.

,My dad...' Alex gestured vaguely in the direction of another worker and kept walking.

The trick worked. The man didn't challenge him again.

He headed toward the crane. It stood in the open, the high priest of construction. Alex hadn't realized how very tall it was until he had reached it. The supporting tower was bolted into a massive block of concrete. It was very narrow—once he squeezed through the iron girders, he could reach out and touch all four sides. A ladder ran straight up the center. Without stopping to think, Alex began to climb.

It's only a ladder, he told himself. You've climbed ladders before. You've got nothing to worry about. But this was a ladder with three hundred rungs. If Alex let go or slipped, there would be nothing to stop him from falling to his death. There were rest platforms at intervals, but Alex didn't dare stop to catch his breath. Somebody might look up and see him. And there was always a chance that the barge, loose from its moorings, might begin to drift. Alex knew he had to hurry.

After two hundred and fifty rungs, the tower narrowed. Alex could see the crane's control cabin directly above him. He looked back down. The men on the building site were suddenly very small and far away. He climbed the last ladder. There was a trapdoor over his head, leading into the cabin. But the trapdoor was locked.

Fortunately, Alex was ready for this. When MI6 had sent him on his first mission, they had given him a number of gadgets—he couldn't exactly call them weapons—to help him out of a tight spot. One of these was a tube marked ZIT-CLEAN, FOR HEALTHIER SKIN. But the cream inside the tube did much more than clean up pimples.

Although Alex had used most of it, he had managed to hold on to the last remnants and often carried the tube with him as a sort of souvenir. He had it in his pocket now. Holding on to the ladder with one hand, he took the tube out with the other. There was very little of the cream left, but Alex knew that a little was all he needed. He opened the tube, squeezed some of the cream onto the lock, and waited. There was a moment's pause, then a hiss and a wisp of smoke.

The cream was eating into the metal. The lock sprang open. Alex pushed back the trapdoor and climbed the last few rungs. He was in.

He had to close the trapdoor again to create enough floor space to stand on. He found himself in a square, metal box, about the same size as a sit-in arcade game. There was a pilot's chair with two joysticks—one on each arm—and instead of a screen, a floor-to-ceiling window with a spectacular view of the building site, the river, and the whole of West London. A small computer monitor had been built into one corner, and at knee level, there was a radio transmitter.

The joysticks beside the arms were surprisingly uncomplicated. Each had just six buttons—two green, two black, and two red. There were even helpful diagrams to show what they did.

The right hand lifted the hook up and down. The left hand moved it along the jib, closer or farther from the cabin. The left hand also controlled the whole top of the crane, rotating it three hundred and sixty degrees. It couldn't have been much simpler. Even the START button was clearly labeled. A big switch for a big toy.

He turned the switch and felt power surge into the control cabin. The computer lit up with a graphic of a barking dog as the warm-up program spun into life. Alex eased himself into the operator's chair. There were still twenty or thirty men on the site. Looking down between his knees, he saw them moving silently far below. Nobody had noticed that anything was wrong.

But still he knew he had to move fast.

He pressed the green button on the right-hand control—green for go—then touched his fingers against the joystick and pushed. Nothing happened! Alex frowned. Maybe it was going to be more complicated than he'd thought. What had he missed? He rested his hands on the joysticks, looking left and right for another control. His right hand moved slightly and suddenly the hook soared up from the ground. It was working!

Unknown to Alex, heat sensors concealed inside the handles of the joysticks had read his body temperature and activated the crane. All modern cranes have the same security system built into them, in case the operator has a heart attack and dies. There can be no accidents. Body heat is needed to make the crane work.

And luckily for him, this crane was a Liebherr 154 EC-H, one of the most modern in the world. The Liebherr is incredibly easy to use, and also remarkably accurate. Even sitting so high above the ground, the operator can pick up a tea bag and drop it into a small china pot. Now Alex pushed sideways with his left hand and gasped as the crane swung around. In front of him he could see the jib stretching out, swinging high over the rooftops of London. The more he Alex settled himself in the chair and pulled back, wondering what would happen next.

Inside the boat, Skoda was opening a bottle of gin. He'd had a good day, selling more than a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of merchandise to the kids at his old school. And the best thing was, they'd all be back for more. Soon, he'd sell them the stuff only if they promised to introduce it to their friends. Then the friends would become customers too. It was the easiest market in the world. He'd gotten them hooked. They were his to do with as he liked.

The fair-haired man working with him was named Beckett. The two had met in prison and decided to go into business together when they got out. The boat had been Beckett's idea. There was no real

kitchen and no toilet, and it was freezing in winter... but it worked. It even amused them to be so close to a police station. Sometimes they enjoyed watching the police cars or boats going past. Of course, the pigs would never think of looking for criminals right on their own doorstep.

Suddenly Beckett swore. ,What the...?'

,What is it?' Skoda looked up.

,The cup...'

Skoda watched as a cup of coffee, which had been sitting on a shelf, began to move. It slid sideways, then fell off with a clatter, spilling cold coffee on the gray rag that they called a carpet. Skoda was confused. The cup seemed to have moved on its own. Nothing had touched it. He giggled. ,How did you do that?' he asked.

,I didn't.'

,Then...'

The fair-haired man was the first to realize what was happening—but even he couldn't guess the truth. ,We're sinking!' he shouted.

He scabbled for the door. Now Skoda felt it for himself. The floor was tilting. Test tubes and beakers slid into each other, then crashed to the floor, glass shattering. He swore and followed Beckett—uphill now. With every second that passed, the gradient grew steeper. But the strange thing was that the barge didn't seem to be sinking at all. On the contrary, the front of it seemed to be rising out of the water.

,What's going on?' Skoda yelled.

,The door's jammed!' Beckett had managed to open it an inch, but the wire on the other side was holding it firm. ,Check the other door!'

But the second door was now high above them. More bottles rolled off the table and smashed. In the kitchen, dirty plates and mugs slid into each other, pieces flying. With something between a sob and a snarl, Skoda tried to climb up the mountainside that the inside of the boat had become. But it was already too steep. The door was almost over his head. He lost his balance and fell backward, shouting as, one second later, the other man was thrown on top of him. The two of them rolled into the corner, tangled up in each other. Plates, cups, knives, forks, and dozens of pieces of scientific equipment crashed into them. The walls of the barge were grinding with the pressure. A window shattered. A table turned itself into a battering ram and buried itself at them. Skoda felt a bone snap in his arm and screamed out loud.

The barge was completely vertical, standing in the water at ninety degrees. For a moment it rested where it was. Then it began to rise...

Alex stared at the barge in amazement. The crane was lifting it at half speed—some sort of override had come into action, slowing the operation down—but it wasn't even straining. Alex could feel the power under his palms. Sitting in the cabin with both hands on the joysticks, his feet apart and the jib of the crane jutting out ahead of him, he felt as if he and the crane had become one. He had only to move an inch and the five-ton boat would be brought to him. He could see it, dangling on the hook, spinning slowly. Water was streaming off the bow. It was already clear of the water, rising up about

five yards per second. He wondered what it must be like inside.

And then the radio beside his knee hissed into life.

‘Crane operator! This is base. What the hell do you think you’re doing? Over!’ A pause, a burst of static. Then the metallic voice was back. ‘Who is in the crane? Who’s up there? Will you identify yourself...’

There was a microphone snaking toward Alex’s chin and he was tempted to say something.

But he decided against it. Hearing a teenager’s voice would only panic them more.

He looked down between his knees. About a dozen construction workers were closing in on the base of the crane. Others were pointing at the boat, jabbering amongst themselves. No sounds reached the cabin. It was as if Alex were cut off from the real world. He felt very secure.

He had no doubt that more workers had already started climbing the ladder and that it would all be over soon, but for the moment he was untouchable. He concentrated on what he was doing. Getting the barge out of the water had been only half his plan. He still had to finish it.

‘Crane operator! Lower the hook! We believe there are people inside the boat and you are endangering their lives. Repeat. Lower the hook!’

The barge was almost two hundred feet above the water, swinging on the end of the hook.

Alex moved his left hand, turning the crane around so that the boat was dragged in an arc along the river and then over dry land. There was a sudden buzz. The jib came to a halt. Alex pushed the joystick. Nothing happened. He glanced at the computer. The screen had gone blank.

Someone at ground level had come to his senses and done the only sensible thing. He had switched off the power. The crane was dead.

Alex sat where he was, watching the barge swaying in the breeze. He hadn’t quite succeeded in what he had set out to do. He had planned to lower the boat—along with its contents—safely into the parking lot by the police station. It would have made a nice surprise for the authorities, he had thought. Instead the boat was now hanging over the conference center that he had seen from Putney Bridge. But at the end of the day, he supposed it didn’t make much difference. The result would be the same.

He stretched his arms and relaxed, waiting for the trapdoor to burst open. This wasn’t going to be easy to explain.

And then he heard the tearing sound.

The metal stanchion that protruded from the end of the deck had never been designed to carry the entire weight of the barge. It was a miracle that it had lasted as long as it had. As Alex watched, openmouthed, the stanchion tore itself free. For a few seconds it clung by one edge to the deck. Then the last metal rivet came loose.

The five-ton barge had been sixty yards above the ground. Now it began to fall.

In the Putney Riverside Conference Center, the chief of the Metropolitan Police was addressing a large crowd of journalists, TV cameramen, civil servants, and government officials.

He was a tall, thin man who took himself very seriously. His dark blue uniform was immaculate, with

every piece of silver—from the studs on his epaulettes to his five medals—

polished until it gleamed. This was his big day. He was sharing the platform with no less a personage than the home secretary himself. The assistant chief of police was there as well as seven lower-ranking officers. A slogan was being projected onto the wall behind him.

WINNING THE WAR AGAINST DRUGS

Silver letters on a blue background. The chief of police had chosen the colors himself, knowing that they matched his uniform. He liked the slogan. He knew it would be in all the major newspapers the next day—along with, just as important, a photograph of himself.

‘We have overlooked nothing!’ he was saying, his voice echoing around the modern room.

He could see the journalists scribbling down his every word. The television cameras were all focused on him. ‘Thanks to my personal involvement and efforts, we have never been more successful.’ He smiled at the home secretary, who smiled toothily back. ‘But we are not resting on our laurels. Oh, no! Any day now we hope to announce another breakthrough.’

That was when the barge hit the glass roof of the conference center. There was an explosion.

The chief of police just had time to dive for cover as a vast, dripping object plunged down toward him. The home secretary was thrown backward, his glasses flying off his face. His security men froze, helpless. The boat crashed into the space in front of them, between the stage and the audience. The side of the cabin had been torn off, and there was the laboratory, exposed, with the two dealers sprawled together in one corner, staring dazedly at the hundreds of policemen and officials who now surrounded them. A cloud of white powder mushroomed up and then fell onto the dark blue uniform of the police chief, covering him from head to toe.

The fire alarms had all gone off. The lights blew out. Then the screaming began.

Meanwhile, the first of the construction workers had made it to the crane cabin and was gazing, astonished, at the fourteen-year-old boy he had found there.

‘Do you...?’ he stammered. ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?’

Alex glanced at the empty hook and at the gaping hole in the roof of the conference center, at the rising smoke and dust. He shrugged apologetically.

‘I was just working on the crime figures,’ he said. ‘And I think there’s been a drop.’

SEARCH AND REPORT

THE CHAUFFEUR-DRIVEN Rolls-Royce Corniche cruised along a tree-lined avenue, penetrating ever deeper into the Lancashire countryside, its 6.75-liter light pressure V8 engine barely a whisper in the great, green silence all around. Alex sat in the back, trying to be unimpressed by this car that cost as much as a house. Forget the plush carpeting, the wooden panels, and the leather seats, he told himself. It's only a car.

It was the day after his meeting at MI6, and, as Alan Blunt had ordered, his appearance had completely changed. He had to look like a rebel, the rich son who wanted to live life by his own rules. So Alex had been dressed in purposefully provocative clothes. He was wearing a T-shirt cut so low that most of his chest was exposed, and there was a leather thong around his neck. A baggy, checked shirt, missing most of its buttons, hung off his shoulders and down to his faded Tommy Hilfiger jeans, frayed at the knees and ankles. Despite his protests, his hair had been cut so short that he almost looked like a skinhead, and his right ear had been pierced. He could still feel it throbbing underneath the temporary stud that had been put in to keep the hole from closing.

The car had reached a set of wrought iron gates, which opened automatically to receive it.

And there was Haverstock Hall, a great mansion with stone figures on the terrace and seven figures in the price. Sir David's family had lived here for generations, Mrs. Jones had told him.

They also seemed to own half the Lancashire countryside. The grounds stretched for miles in every direction, with sheep dotted across the hills on one side and three horses watching from an enclosure on the other. The house itself was Georgian: white brick with slender windows and columns. Everything looked very neat. There was a walled garden with evenly spaced beds, a square glass conservatory housing a swimming pool, and a series of ornamental hedges with every leaf perfectly in place.

The car stopped. The horses swung their necks around to watch Alex get out, their tails rhythmically beating at flies. Nothing else moved.

The chauffeur walked around to the trunk. 'Sir David will be inside,' he said. He had disapproved of Alex from the moment he set eyes on him. Of course, he hadn't said as much.

But he was a professional. He could show it with his eyes.

Alex moved away from the car, drawn toward the conservatory on the other side of the drive. It was a warm day, the sun beating down on the glass, and the water on the other side looked suddenly inviting. He passed through an open set of doors. It was hot inside the conservatory. The smell of chlorine rose up from the water' stifling him.

He had thought that the pool was empty, but as he watched, a figure swam up from the bottom, breaking through the surface just in front of him. It was a girl, dressed only in a white bikini. She had long, black hair and dark eyes, but her skin was pale. Alex guessed she must be fifteen years old and remembered what Mrs. Jones had told him about Sir David Friend. 'He has a daughter ... a year older than you.' So this must be her. He watched her heave herself out of the water. Her body was well shaped, closer to the woman she would become than the girl she had been. She was going to be beautiful. That much was certain. The trouble was, she already knew it. When she looked at Alex,

arrogance flashed in her eyes.

„Who are you?“ she asked. „What are you doing in here?“

„I'm Alex.“

„Oh, yes.“ She reached for a towel and wrapped it around her neck. „Daddy said you were coming, but I didn't expect you just to walk in like this.“ Her voice was very adult and upper class. It sounded strange, coming out of that fifteen-year-old mouth. „Do you swim?“ she asked.

„Yes,“ Alex said.

„That's a shame. I don't like having to share the pool. Especially with a boy. And a smelly London boy at that.“ She ran her eyes over Alex, taking in the torn jeans, the shaven hair, the stud in his ear. She shuddered. „I can't think what Daddy was doing, agreeing to let you stay,“

she went on. „And having to pretend you're my brother! What a ghastly idea! If I did have a brother, I can assure you he wouldn't look like you.“

Alex was wondering whether to pick the girl up and throw her back into the pool or out through a window when there was a movement behind him, and he turned to see a tall, rather aristocratic man with curling gray hair and glasses, wearing a sports jacket, open-neck shirt, and cords, standing just behind him. He too seemed a little jolted by Alex's appearance, but he recovered quickly, extending a hand. „Alex?“ he demanded.

„Yes.“

„I'm David Friend.“

Alex shook his hand. „How do you do,“ he said politely.

„I hope you had a good journey. I see you've met my daughter.“ He smiled at the girl, who was now sitting beside the pool, drying herself and ignoring them both.

„We haven't actually introduced ourselves,“ Alex said.

„Her name is Fiona.“

„Fiona Friend.“ Alex smiled. „That's not a name I'll forget.“

„I'm sure the two of you will get along fine.“ Sir David didn't sound convinced. He gestured back toward the house. „Why don't we go and talk in the study?“

Alex followed him back across the drive and into the house. The front door opened into a hall that could have come straight out of the pages of an expensive magazine. Everything was perfect, the antique furniture, ornaments, and paintings placed exactly so. There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen and even the sunlight, streaming in through the windows, seemed almost artificial, as if it was there only to bring out the best in everything it touched. It was the house of a man who knows exactly what he wants and has the time and money to get it.

„Nice place,“ Alex said.

„Thank you. Please come this way.“ Sir David opened a heavy, oak-paneled door to reveal a sophisticated and modern office beyond. There was a desk and two chairs, a pair of computers, a white leather sofa, and a series of metal bookshelves. Sir David motioned at the chair and sat down

behind the desk.

He was unsure of himself. Alex could see it immediately. Sir David Friend might run a business empire worth millions—seven billions—of dollars, but this was a new experience for him. Having Alex here, knowing who and what he was, he wasn't quite sure how to react.

‚I've been told very little about you,‘ he began. ‚Alan Blunt got in touch with me and asked me to put you up here for the rest of the week, to pretend that you're my son. I have to say, you don't look anything like me.‘

‚I don't look anything like myself either,‘ Alex said.

‚You're on your way to some school in the French Alps. They want you to investigate it.‘

He paused. ‚Nobody asked me my opinion,‘ he said, ‚but I'll give it to you anyway. I don't like the idea of a fourteen-year-old boy being used as a spy. It's dangerous—‘

‚I can look after myself,‘ Alex cut in.

‚I mean, it's dangerous to the government. If you manage to get yourself killed and anyone finds out, it could cause the prime minister a great deal of embarrassment.‘ Sir David sighed. ‚I advised him against it, but for once he overruled me. It seems that the decision has already been made. This school—the academy—has already telephoned me to say that the assistant director will be coming here to pick you up next Saturday. It's a woman. A Mrs. Stellenbosch. That's a South African name, I think.‘

Sir David had a number of bulky files on his desk. He slid them forward. ‚In the meantime, I understand you have to familiarize yourself with details about my family. I've prepared a number of files. You'll also find information here about the school you're meant to have been expelled from—Eton. You can start reading them tonight.‘ Alex took them and he went on. ‚If you need to know anything more, just ask. Fiona will be with you the whole time.‘ He glanced down at his fingertips. ‚I'm sure that in itself will be quite an experience for you.‘

The door opened and a woman came in. She was slim with dark hair, very much like her daughter. She was wearing a simple mauve dress with a string of pearls around her neck.

‚David,‘ she began, then stopped, seeing Alex.

‚This is my wife,‘ Friend said. ‚Caroline, this is the boy I was telling you about. Alex.‘

‚It's very nice to meet you, Alex.‘ Lady Caroline tried to smile but her lips managed only a faint twitch. ‚I understand you're going to stay with us for a while.‘

‚Yes, Mother,‘ Alex said.

Lady Caroline blushed.

‚He has to pretend to be our son,‘ Sir David reminded her. He turned to Alex. ‚Fiona doesn't know anything about MI6 and the rest of it. I don't want to alarm her. I've told her that it's connected with my work ... a social experiment, if you like. She's to pretend you're her brother, to give you a week in the country as part of the family. I'd prefer it if you didn't tell her the truth.‘

‚Dinner is in half an hour,‘ Lady Caroline said. ‚Do you eat venison?‘ She sniffed.

‚Perhaps you'd like to shower before you eat? I'll show you to your room.‘

Sir David stood up. 'You've got a lot of reading to do. I'm afraid I have to go back to London tomorrow—I have lunch with the president of France—so I won't be able to help you.

But, as I say, if there's anything you don't know...'

'Fiona Friend,' Alex said.

Alex had been given a small, comfortable room at the back of the house. He took a quick shower, then put his old clothes back on again. He liked to feel clean but he had to look grimy—

it suited the character of the boy he was supposed to be. He opened the first of the files. Sir David had been thorough. He had given Alex the names and recent histories of just about the entire family, as well as photographs of vacations, details of the house and stables in Mayfair, the apartments in New York, Paris, and Rome, and the villa in Barbados. There were newspaper clippings, magazine articles ... everything he could possibly need.

A gong sounded. It was seven o'clock. Alex went downstairs and into the dining room. The room had six windows and a polished mahogany table long enough to seat fifteen. But only the three of them were there: Sir David, Lady Caroline, and Fiona. The food had already been served, presumably by a butler or cook. Sir David gestured at an empty chair. Alex sat down.

'Fiona was just talking about Soloman,' Lady Caroline said. There was a pause. 'Soloman is a horse. We have lots of horses.' She turned to Alex. 'Do you ride?'

'Only my bicycle,' Alex said.

'I'm sure Alex isn't interested in horses,' Fiona said. She appeared to be in a bad mood. 'In fact, I doubt if we have anything in common. Why do I have to pretend he's my brother? The whole thing is completely—'

'Fiona...,' Sir David muttered in a low voice.

'Well, it's all very well having him here, Daddy, but it is meant to be my Easter vacation.'

Alex realized that Fiona must go to a private school. Her term would have ended earlier than his. 'I don't think it's fair.'

'Alex is here because of my work,' Sir David continued. It was strange, Alex thought, the way they talked about him as if he weren't actually there. 'I know you have a lot of questions, Fiona, but you're just going to have to do as I say. He's with us only until the end of the week. I want you to look after him.'

'But he's a city boy!' Fiona insisted. 'He's going to hate it here. And anyway, how can pretending he's my brother help you with your supermarkets?'

'Fiona...,' Sir David didn't want any more argument. 'It's what I told you. An experiment.

And you will make him feel welcome!'

Fiona picked up her glass and looked directly at Alex for the first time since he had come into the room. 'We'll see about that,' she said.

The week seemed endless. After only two days, Alex was beginning to think that Fiona was right. He was a city boy. He had lived his whole life in London and felt utterly lost, suffocating in the big green blanket of the countryside. The estate went on for as far as the eye could see, and the Friends seemed

to have no connection with the real world. Alex had never felt more isolated. Sir David himself had disappeared to London. Lady Caroline did her best to avoid Alex. Once or twice she drove into Skipton—the nearest town—but otherwise she seemed to spend a lot of time gardening or arranging flowers. And Fiona...

She had made it clear from the start how much she disliked Alex. There could be no reason for this. It was simply that he was an outsider, and Fiona seemed to mistrust anything that didn't belong to the miniature world of Haverstock Hall. She'd asked him several times what he was really doing there. Alex had shrugged and said nothing, which had only made her dislike him all the more.

And then, on the third day, she introduced him to some of her friends.

'I'm going shooting,' she told him. 'I don't suppose you want to come?'

Alex shrugged. He had memorized most of the details in the files and figured he could easily pass as a member of the family. Now he was counting the hours until the woman from the academy arrived to take him away.

'Have you ever been shooting?' Fiona asked.

'No,' Alex said.

'I go hunting and shooting,' Fiona said. 'But of course, you're a city boy. You wouldn't understand.'

'What's so great about killing animals?' Alex asked.

'It's part of the country way of life. It's tradition.' Fiona looked at him as if he were stupid.

It was how she always looked at him. 'Anyway, the animals enjoy it.'

The shooting party turned out to be young and—apart from Fiona—entirely male. Five of them were waiting on the edge of a forest that was part of the Haverstock estate. Rufus, the leader, was sixteen and well built with dark, curling hair. He seemed to be Fiona's boyfriend.

The others—Henry, Max, Bartholomew, and Fred—were about the same age. Alex looked at them with a heavy heart. They had uniform Barbour jackets, tweed trousers, flat caps, and Huntsman leather boots. They spoke with uniform upper-class accents. Each of them carried a shotgun, with the barrel broken over his arm. Two of them were smoking. They gazed at Alex with barely concealed contempt. Fiona must have already told them about him. The city boy.

Quickly, she made the introductions. Rufus stepped forward.

'Nice to have you with us,' he drawled. He ran his eyes over Alex, not bothering to hide his contempt. 'Up for a bit of shooting, are you?'

'I don't have a gun,' Alex said.

'Well, I'm afraid I'm not going to lend you mine.' Rufus snapped the barrel back into place and held it up for Alex to see. It was a beautiful gun, with twenty-five inches of gleaming steel stretching out of a dark walnut stock decorated with ornately carved, solid silver sideplates.

'It's an over-and-under shotgun with detachable trigger lock, handmade by Abbiatico and Salvinelli,' he said. 'It cost me thirty grand—or my mother, anyway. It was a birthday present.'

'It couldn't have been easy to wrap,' Alex said. 'Where did she put the ribbon?'

Rufus's smile faded. 'You wouldn't know anything about guns,' he said. He nodded at one of the other teenagers, who handed Alex a much more ordinary weapon. It was old and a little rusty. 'You can use this one,' he said. 'And if you're very good and don't get in the way, maybe we'll let you have a bullet.'

They all laughed at that. Then the two smokers put out their cigarettes and everyone set off into the woods.

Thirty minutes later, Alex knew he had made a mistake in coming. The boys blasted away left and right, aiming at anything that moved. A rabbit spun in a glistening red ball. A wood pigeon tumbled out of the branches and flapped around on the leaves below. Whatever the quality of their weapons, the teenagers weren't good shots. The animals they managed to hit were only wounded, and Alex felt a growing sickness, following this trail of blood.

They reached a clearing and paused to reload. Alex turned to Fiona. 'I'm going back to the house,' he said.

'Why? Can't stand the sight of a little blood?'

Alex glanced at a hare about fifty feet away. It was lying on its side with its back legs kicking helplessly. 'I'm surprised they let you carry guns,' he said. 'I thought you had to be seventeen.'

Rufus overheard him. He stepped forward, an ugly look in his eyes. 'We don't bother with rules in the countryside,' he muttered.

'Maybe Alex wants to call a policeman!' Fiona said.

'The nearest police station is forty miles from here,' Rufus said with a cold smile.

'Do you want to borrow my cell phone?' one of the other boys asked.

They all laughed again. Alex had had enough. Without saying another word, he turned around and walked off.

It had taken him thirty minutes to reach the clearing, but thirty minutes later he was still stuck in the woods, completely surrounded by trees and wild shrubs. Alex realized he was lost.

He was annoyed with himself. He should have watched where he was going when he was following Fiona and the others. The forest was enormous. Walk in the wrong direction and he might blunder onto the North Yorkshire moors ... and it could be days before he was found. At the same time, the spring foliage was so thick that he could barely see ten yards in any direction. How could he possibly find his way? Should he try to retrace his steps or continue forward in the hope of stumbling on the right path?

Alex sensed danger before the first shot was fired. Perhaps it was the snapping of a twig or the click of a metal bolt being slipped into place. He froze—and that was what saved him. There was an explosion—loud, close—and a tree one step ahead of him shattered, splinters of wood dancing in the air.

Alex turned around, searching for whoever had fired the shot. 'What are you doing?' he shouted. 'You nearly hit me!'

Almost immediately there was a second shot and, just behind it, a whoop of excited laughter. And

then Alex realized what was happening: They hadn't mistaken him for an animal. They were aiming at him for fun.

He dived forward and began to run. The trunks of the trees seemed to press in on him from all sides, threatening to bar his way. The ground underneath was soft from recent rain and dragged at his feet, trying to glue them into place. There was a third explosion. He ducked, feeling the gunshot spray above his head, shredding the foliage.

Anywhere else in the world, this would have been madness. But this was the middle of the English countryside and these were rich, bored teenagers who were used to having things their own way. Somehow, Alex had insulted them. Perhaps it had been the jibe about the wrapping paper. Perhaps it was his refusal to tell Fiona who he really was. But they had decided to teach him a lesson, and they would worry about the consequences later. Did they mean to kill him?

„We don't bother with rules in the countryside,“ Rufus had said. If Alex was badly wounded—or even killed—they would somehow get away with it. *A dreadful accident. He wasn't looking where he was going and stepped into the line of fire.*

No. That was impossible.

They were trying to scare him—that was all.

Two more shots. A pheasant erupted out of the ground, a ball of spinning feathers, and screamed up into the sky. Alex ran on, his breath rasping in his throat. A thick briar reached out across his chest and tore at his clothes. He still had the gun he had been given, and he used it to beat a way through. A tangle of roots almost sent him sprawling.

„Alex? Where are you?“ The voice belonged to Rufus. It was high-pitched and mocking, coming from the other side of a barrier of leaves. There was another shot, but this one went high over his head. They couldn't see him. Had he escaped?

No, he hadn't. Alex came to a stumbling, sweating halt. He had broken out of the woods but he was still hopelessly lost. Worse—he was trapped. He had come to the edge of a wide, filthy lake. The water was a scummy brown and looked almost solid. No ducks or wild birds came anywhere near the surface. The evening sun beat down on it and the smell of decay drifted up.

„He went that way!“

„No ... through here!“

„Let's try the lake.“

Alex heard the voices and knew that he couldn't let them find him here. He had a sudden image of his body, weighed down with stones, at the bottom of the lake. But that gave him an idea. He had to hide.

He stepped into the water. He would need something to breathe through. He had seen people do this in films. They would lie in the water and breathe through a hollow reed. But there were no reeds here. Apart from grass and thick, slimy algae, nothing was growing at all.

One minute later, Rufus appeared at the edge of the lake, his gun still hooked over his arm.

He stopped and looked around with eyes that knew the forest well. Nothing moved.

„He must have doubled back,“ he said.

The other hunters had gathered behind him. There was tension between them now, a guilty silence. They knew the game had gone too far.

„Let’s forget him,“ one of them said.

„Yeah...“

„We’ve taught him a lesson.“

They were in a hurry to get home. As one, they disappeared back the way they had come.

Rufus was left on his own, still clutching his gun, searching for Alex. He took one last look across the water, then turned to follow them.

That was when Alex struck. He had been lying under the water, watching the vague shapes of the teenagers as if through a sheet of thick brown glass. The barrel of the shotgun was in his mouth. The rest of the gun was just above the surface of the lake. He was using the hollow tubes to breathe. Now he rose up—a nightmare creature oozing mud and water, with fury in his eyes.

Rufus heard him but he was too late. Alex swung the shotgun, catching Rufus in the small of the back. Rufus grunted and fell to his knees, his own gun falling out of his hands. Alex picked it up. There were two cartridges in the breech. He snapped the gun shut.

Rufus looked at him, and suddenly all the arrogance had gone and he was just a stupid, frightened teenager, struggling to get to his knees.

„Alex...“ The single word came out as a whimper. It was as if he were seeing Alex for the first time. „I’m sorry!“ he sniveled. „We weren’t really going to hurt you. It was a joke. Fiona put us up to it. We just wanted to scare you. Please...“

Alex paused, breathing heavily. „How do I get out of here?“ he asked.

„Just follow the lake around,“ Rufus said. „There’s a path.“

Rufus was still on his knees. There were tears in his eyes. Alex realized that he was pointing the silver-plated shotgun in his direction. He turned it away, disgusted with himself. This boy wasn’t the enemy. He was nothing.

„Don’t follow me,“ Alex said and began to walk.

„Please!“ Rufus called after him. „Can I have my gun back? My mother would kill me if I lost it.“

Alex stopped. He weighed the weapon in his hands, then threw it with all his strength. The handcrafted Italian shotgun spun twice in the dying light, then disappeared with a splash in the middle of the lake. „You’re too young to play with guns,“ he said.

He walked away, letting the forest swallow him up.

THE TUNNEL

THE MAN SITTING IN THE gold, antique chair turned his head slowly and gazed out the window at the snow-covered slopes of Point Blanc. Dr. Hugo Grief was almost sixty years old with short, white hair and a face that was almost colorless too. His skin was white, his lips vague shadows. Even his tongue was no more than gray. And yet, against this blank background, he wore circular wire glasses with dark red lenses. For him, the entire world would be the color of blood. He had long fingers, the nails beautifully manicured. He was dressed in a dark suit buttoned up to his neck. If there were such a thing as a vampire, it might look very much like Dr. Hugo Grief.

‘I have decided to move the Gemini Project into its last phase,’ he said. He spoke with a South African accent, biting into each word before it left his mouth. ‘There can be no further delay.’

‘I understand, Dr. Grief.’

A woman sat opposite Dr. Grief, dressed in tight-fitting spandex with a sweatband around her head. This was Eva Stellenbosch. She had just finished her morning workout—two hours of weight lifting and aerobics—and was still breathing heavily, her huge muscles rising and falling. Mrs. Stellenbosch had a facial structure that wasn’t quite human, with lips curving out far in front of her nose and wisps of bright ginger hair hanging over a high-domed forehead.

She was holding a glass filled with some milky green liquid. Her fingers were thick and stubby.

She had to be careful not to break the glass.

She sipped her drink, then frowned. ‘Are you sure we’re ready?’ she asked.

‘We have no choice in the matter. We have had two unsatisfactory results in the last few months. First Ivanov. Then Roscoe in New York. Quite apart from the expense of arranging the terminations, it’s possible that someone may have connected the two deaths.’

‘Possible, but unlikely,’ Mrs. Stellenbosch said.

‘The intelligence services are idle and inefficient, it is true. The CIA in America. MI6 in England. Even the KGB. They’re all shadows of what they used to be. But even so, there’s always the chance that one of them might have accidentally stumbled onto something. The sooner we end this phase of the operation, the more chance we have of remaining unnoticed.’

Dr. Grief brought his hands together and rested his chin on his fingers. ‘When is the final boy arriving?’ he asked.

‘Alex?’ Mrs. Stellenbosch sipped from her cup and set it down. She opened her handbag and took out a handkerchief, which she used to wipe her lips. ‘I am traveling to England tomorrow,’ she said.

‘Excellent. You’ll take the boy to Paris on the way here?’

‘Of course, Doctor. If that’s what you wish.’

‘It is very much what I wish. We can do all the preliminary work there. It will save time.’

‘What about the Sprintz boy?’

‘I’m afraid we still need another few days.’

,That means that he and Alex will be here at the same time.'

,Yes.'

Dr. Grief considered. He had to balance the risk of the two boys meeting against the dangers of moving too fast. It was fortunate that he had a scientific mind. His calculations were never wrong.

,Very well,' he said. ,The Sprintz boy can stay with us for another few days. I sense he is growing restless, and a new friend might put his mind at ease.'

Mrs. Stellenbosch nodded. She lifted her glass and emptied its contents, the veins in her neck throbbing as she swallowed.

,Alex Friend is an excellent catch for us,' Dr. Grief said.

,Supermarkets?' The woman sounded unconvinced.

,His father has the prime minister's ear. He is an impressive man. His son, I am sure, will meet up to all our expectations.' Dr. Grief smiled. His eyes glowed red. ,Very soon, we'll have Alex here, at the academy. And then, at last, the Gemini Project will be complete.'

,You're sitting all wrong,' Fiona said. ,Your back isn't straight. Your hands should be lower. And your feet are pointing the wrong way.'

,What does it matter, so long as you're enjoying yourself?' Alex asked, speaking through gritted teeth.

It was the fourth day of his stay at Haverstock Hall, and Fiona had been persuaded to take him out riding. Alex wasn't enjoying himself at all. First he'd had to endure the inevitable lecture—although he had barely listened. The horses were Iberian or Hungarian. They'd won a bucketful of gold medals. Alex didn't care. All he knew was that his horse was big and black and attracted flies. And that he was riding it with all the style of a sack of potatoes on a trampoline.

The two of them had barely mentioned the business in the forest. When Alex had limped back to the house, soaked and freezing, Fiona had politely fetched him a towel and offered him a cup of tea.

,You tried to kill me!' Alex said.

,Don't be silly.' Fiona looked at Alex with something like pity in her eyes. ,We would never do that. Rufus is a very nice boy.'

,What?'

,It was just a game, Alex. Just a bit of fun.'

And that was it. Fiona had smiled as if everything had been explained and then gone to have a swim. Alex had spent the rest of the evening with the files. He was trying to take in a fake history that spanned fourteen years. There were uncles and aunts, friends at Eton, a whole crowd of people he had to know without ever having met any of them. More than that, he was trying to get the feel of this luxurious lifestyle. That was why he was here now, out riding with Fiona—she upright in her riding jacket and breeches, he bumping along behind.

They had ridden for about an hour and a half when they came to a tunnel. Fiona had tried to teach Alex a bit of technique—the difference, for example, between walking, trotting, and cantering. But this was one sport he had already decided he would never take up. Every bone in his body had been rattled out of shape, and his bottom was so bruised he wondered if he would ever be able to sit down

again. Fiona seemed to be enjoying his torment. He even wondered if she had chosen a particularly bumpy route to add to his bruises. Or maybe it was just a particularly bumpy horse.

There was a single railway line ahead of them, crossed by a tiny lane with an automatic gate crossing equipped with a bell and flashing lights to warn motorists of any approaching train.

Fiona steered her horse—a smaller gray—toward it. Alex's horse automatically followed. He assumed they were going to cross the line, but when she reached the barrier, Fiona stopped.

„There's a shortcut we can take if you want to get home,“ she said.

„A shortcut would be good,“ Alex admitted.

„It's that way.“

Fiona pointed up the line toward a tunnel, a gaping black hole in the side of a hill, surrounded by dark red brick. Alex looked at her to see if she was joking. She was obviously quite serious. He turned back to the tunnel. It was like the barrel of a gun, pointing at him, warning him to keep away. He could almost imagine the giant finger on the trigger, somewhere behind the hill. How long was it? Looking more carefully, he could see a pinprick of light at the other end, perhaps half a mile away.

„You're not serious,“ he said.

„Actually, Alex, I don't usually tell jokes. When I say something, I mean it. I'm just like my father.“

„Except your father isn't completely crazy,“ Alex muttered.

Fiona pretended not to hear him. „The tunnel is about one mile long,“ she explained.

„There's a bridge on the other side, then another gate crossing. If we go that way, we can be home in thirty minutes. Otherwise it's an hour and a half back the way we came.“

„Then let's go the way we came.“

„Oh, Alex, don't be such a scaredy-cat!“ Fiona pouted at him. „There's only one train an hour on this line and the next one isn't due for...“ She looked at her watch. „...twenty minutes.“

„I've been through the tunnel a hundred times and it never takes more than five minutes. Less if you canter.“

„It's still crazy to ride on a railway line.“

„Well, you'll have to find your own way home if you turn back.“ She kicked with her heels and her horse jerked forward, past the barrier and onto the line. „I'll see you later.“

But Alex followed her. He would never have been able to ride back to the house on his own.

He didn't know the way, and he could barely control his horse. Even now it was following Fiona with no prompting from him. Would the two animals really enter the darkness of the tunnel? It seemed incredible, but Fiona had said they had done it before, and sure enough, the horses walked into the side of the hill without even hesitating.

Alex shivered as the light was suddenly cut off behind him. It was cold and clammy inside.

The air smelled of soot and diesel. The tunnel was a natural echo chamber. The horses' hooves rattled all around them as they struck against the gravel between the ties. What if his horse stumbled?

Alex put the thought out of his mind. The leather saddles creaked. Slowly his eyes got used to the dark. A certain amount of sunshine was filtering in from behind. More comfortably, the way out was clearly visible straight ahead, the circle of light widening with every step. He tried to relax. Perhaps this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

And then Fiona spoke. She had slowed down, allowing his horse to catch up with hers. 'Are you still worried about the train, Alex?' she said scornfully. 'Perhaps you'd like to go faster.'

He heard the riding crop whistle through the air and felt his horse jerk as Fiona whipped it hard on the rear. The horse whinnied and leapt forward. Alex was almost thrown backward off the saddle. Digging in with his legs, he just managed to cling on, but the whole top of his body was at a crazy angle, the reins tearing into the horse's mouth. Fiona laughed. And then Alex was aware only of the wind rushing past him, the thick blackness spinning around his face and the horses' hooves striking heavily at the gravel as the animal careened forward. Soot blew into his eyes, blinding him. He thought he was going to fall. Minutes seemed to pass in mere seconds.

But then, miraculously, they burst out into the light. Alex fought for his balance and then brought the horse back under control, pulling back with the reins and squeezing the horse's flanks with his knees. He took a deep breath and waited for Fiona to appear.

His horse had come to rest on the bridge that she had mentioned. The bridge was fashioned out of thick iron girders and spanned a river. There had been a lot of rain that month and, about fifty feet below him, the water was racing past, dark green and deep. Carefully, he turned around to face the tunnel. If he lost control here, it would be easy to fall over the edge. The sides of the bridge couldn't have been more than three feet high.

He could hear Fiona approaching. She had been cantering after him, probably laughing the entire way. He gazed into the tunnel, and that was when Fiona's gray horse burst out, raced past him, and disappeared through the gate crossing on the other side of the bridge.

But Fiona wasn't on it.

The horse had come out alone.

It took Alex a few seconds to work it out. His head was reeling. She must have fallen off.

Perhaps her horse had stumbled. She could be lying inside the tunnel. On the track. How long was there until the next train? Twenty minutes, she had said. But at least five of those minutes had gone, and she might have been exaggerating to begin with.

Alex swore. Damn this wretched girl with her spoiled brat behavior and her almost suicidal games. But he couldn't leave her. He seized hold of the reins. Somehow he would get this horse to obey him. He had to get her out, and he had to do it fast.

Perhaps his desperation managed to communicate itself to the horse's brain. The animal wheeled around and tried to back away, but when Alex kicked with his heels, it stumbled forward and reluctantly entered the darkness of the tunnel for a second time. Alex kicked again.

He didn't want to hurt it, but he could think of no other way to make it obey him.

The horse trotted on. Alex searched ahead. 'Fiona!' he called out. There was no reply. He had hoped that she would be walking toward him, but he couldn't hear any footsteps. If only there were more

light!

The horse stopped and there she was, right in front of him, lying on the ground, her arms and chest actually on the line. If a train came now, it would cut her in half. It was too dark to see her face, but when she spoke he heard the pain in her voice.

„Alex...,” she said. „I think I’ve broken my ankle.”

„What happened?”

„There was a cobweb or something. I was trying to keep up with you. It went in my face and I lost my balance.”

She’d been trying to keep up with him! She almost sounded as if she were blaming him—as if she had forgotten that she was the one who had whipped his horse on in the first place.

„Can you get up?” Alex asked.

„I don’t think so.”

Alex sighed. Keeping a tight hold on the reins, he slid off his horse. Fiona had fallen right in the middle of the tunnel. He forced himself not to panic. If what she had told him was true, the next train must still be at least ten minutes away.

He reached down to help her up. His foot came to rest on one of the rails ...

... and he felt something. Under his foot. Shivering up his leg. The track was vibrating.

The train was on its way.

„You’ve got to stand up,” he said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. He could already see the train in his imagination, thundering along the line. When it plunged into the tunnel, it would be a five-hundred-ton torpedo that would smash them to pieces. He could hear the grinding of the wheels, the roar of the engines. Blood and darkness. It would be a horrible way to die.

But he still had time.

„Can you move your toes?” he asked.

„I think so.” Fiona was clutching him.

„Then your ankle’s probably sprained, not broken. Come on.”

He dragged her up, wondering if it would be possible to stay inside the tunnel, on the edge of the track. If they hugged the wall, the train might simply go past them. But Alex knew there wouldn’t be enough space. And even if the train missed them, it would still hit the horse.

Suppose it derailed? Dozens of people could be killed.

„What train comes this way?” he asked. „Does it carry passengers?”

„Yes.” Fiona was sounding tearful. „It’s a Virgin train. Heading up to Glasgow.”

Alex sighed. It was just his luck to get the only Virgin train ever to arrive on time.

Fiona froze. „What’s that?” she asked.

She had heard the clanging of a bell. The gate crossing! It was signaling the approach of the train, the

barrier lowering itself over the road.

And then Alex heard a second sound that made his blood run cold. For a moment he couldn't breathe. It was extraordinary. His breath was stuck in his lungs and refused to get up to his mouth. His whole body was paralyzed as if some switch had been thrown in his brain. He was simply terrified.

The screech of a train whistle. It was still a mile or more away, but the tunnel was acting as a sound conductor and he could feel it cutting into him. And then another sound: the rolling thunder of the diesel engine. It was moving fast toward them. Underneath his foot, the rail vibrated more violently.

Alex gulped for air and forced his legs to obey him. 'Get on the horse,' he shouted. 'I'll help you.'

Not caring how much pain he caused her, he dragged Fiona next to the horse and forced her up onto the saddle. The noise grew louder with every second that passed. The rail was humming softly, like a giant tuning fork. The very air inside the tunnel seemed to be in motion, spinning left and right as if trying to get out of the way.

Fiona squealed and Alex felt her weight leave his arms as she fell onto the saddle. The horse whinnied and took a half step sideways, and for a dreadful moment Alex thought she was going to ride off without him. There was just enough light to make out the shapes of both the animal and its rider.

He saw Fiona grabbing the reins. She brought it back under control. Alex reached up and caught hold of the horse's mane. He used the thick hair to pull himself onto the saddle, in front of Fiona. The noise of the train was getting louder and louder. Soot and loose concrete were trickling out of the curving walls. The wind currents were twisting faster, the rails singing. For a moment the two of them were tangled together, but then he had the reins and she was clinging on to him, her arms around his chest.

'Go!' he shouted and kicked the horse.

The horse needed no encouragement. It raced for the light, galloping up the railway line, throwing Alex and Fiona back and forward, into each other.

Alex didn't dare look behind him, but he felt the train as it reached the mouth of the tunnel and plunged in, traveling at 105 miles per hour. A shock wave hammered into them. The train was punching the air out of its way, filling the space with solid steel. The horse understood the danger and burst forward with new speed, its hooves flying over the ties in great strides. Ahead of them the tunnel mouth opened up, but Alex knew, with a sickening sense of despair, that they weren't going to make it. Even when they got out of the tunnel, they would still be hemmed in by the sides of the bridge. The second gate crossing was a hundred yards farther down the line. They might get out but they would die in the open air.

The horse passed through the end of the tunnel. Alex felt the circle of darkness slip over his shoulders. Fiona was screaming, her arms wrapped around him so tightly that he could barely breathe. He could hardly hear her. The roar of the train was right behind him, and as the horse began a desperate race over the bridge, he sneaked a glance around. He just had time to see the huge, metallic beast roar out of the tunnel, towering over them, its body painted the brilliant red of the Virgin colors, the driver staring in horror from behind his window. There was a second blast from the train whistle, this one all-consuming, exploding all around them. Alex knew what he had to do. He pulled on one rein, at the same time kicking with the opposite foot.

He just had to hope the horse would understand what he wanted.

And somehow it worked. The horse veered around. Now it was facing the side of the bridge. There was a final, deafening blast from the train. Diesel fumes smothered them. Alex kicked again with all his strength. The horse jumped.

The train roared past, missing them by inches. But now they were in the air, over the side of the bridge. The railcars were still thundering past, a red blur. Fiona screamed a second time.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion as they fell. One moment they were next to the bridge, a moment later underneath it and still falling. The green river rose up to receive them.

The horse with its two riders plummeted through the air and crashed into the river. Alex just had time to snatch a breath. He was afraid that the water wouldn't be deep enough, that all three of them would end up with broken necks. But they hit the surface and passed through, down into a freezing, dark green whirlpool that sucked at them greedily, threatening to keep them there forever. Fiona was torn away from him. He felt the horse kick itself free. Bubbles exploded out of his mouth and he realized he was yelling.

Finally, Alex rose to the surface again. The water was rushing past and, dragged back by his clothes and shoes, he clumsily swam for the nearest bank.

The train driver hadn't stopped. Perhaps he had been too frightened by what had happened. Perhaps he wanted to pretend it hadn't happened at all. Either way, the train had gone. Alex reached the bank and pulled himself, shivering, onto the grass. There was a splutter and a cough from behind him, and Fiona appeared. She had lost her riding hat, and her long black hair was hanging over her face. Alex looked past her. The horse had also managed to reach dry land. It trotted forward and shook itself, seemingly unharmed. Alex was glad about that. When all was said and done, the horse had saved both their lives.

He stood up. Water dripped out of his clothes. There was no feeling anywhere in his body.

He wondered whether it was because of the cold water or the shock of what he had just been through. He went over to Fiona and helped her to her feet.

„Are you all right?“ he asked.

„Yes.“ She was looking at him strangely. She wobbled, and he put out a hand to steady her.

„Thank you,“ she said.

„That's all right.“

„No.“ She held on to his hand. Her shirt had fallen open and she threw back her head, shaking the hair out of her eyes. „What you did back there ... it was fantastic. Alex, I'm sorry I've been so awful to you all week. I thought—because you were here only for charity and all the rest of it—I thought you were just an oik. But I was wrong about you. You're really great.

„And I know we're going to be friends now.“ She half closed her eyes and moved toward him, her lips slightly parted. „You can kiss me if you like,“ she said.

Alex let go of her and turned away. „Thanks, Fiona,“ he said. „But frankly I'd prefer to kiss the horse.“

SPECIAL EDITION

THE HELICOPTER CIRCLED twice over Haverstock Hall before beginning its descent. It was a Robinson R44, four-seater aircraft, American built. There was only one person—the pilot—inside. Sir David Friend had returned from London, and he and his wife came outside to watch it land in front of the house. The engine noise died down and the rotors began to slow. The cabin door slid open, and the pilot got out, dressed in a one-piece leather flying suit, helmet, and goggles.

The pilot walked up to them, extending a hand. ‘Good morning,’ she shouted over the noise of the rotors. ‘I’m Mrs. Stellenbosch. From the academy...’

If Sir David and Lady Caroline had been thrown by their first sight of Alex, the appearance of the assistant director left them frozen to the spot. Sir David was the first to recover. ‘You flew the helicopter yourself?’

‘Yes ... I’m qualified,’ Mrs. Stellenbosch answered.

‘Would you like to come in?’ Lady Caroline said. ‘Perhaps you’d like some tea.’

She led them into the house and into the living room, where Mrs. Stellenbosch sat, legs apart, her helmet on the sofa beside her. Sir David and Lady Caroline sat opposite her. Tea had been brought in on a tray.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’ Mrs. Stellenbosch asked.

She reached into a pocket and took out a small packet of cigars without waiting for an answer. She lit one and blew smoke. ‘What a very beautiful house you have, Sir David.

Georgian, I would say, but decorated with such taste! And where, may I ask, is Alex?’

‘He went for a walk,’ Sir David said.

‘Perhaps he’s a little nervous.’ She smiled again and took the teacup Lady Caroline had proffered. ‘I understand that Alex has been a great source of concern to you.’

Sir David Friend nodded. His eyes gave nothing away. For the next few minutes, he told Mrs. Stellenbosch about Alex, how he had been expelled from Eton, how out of control he had become. Lady Caroline listened to all this in silence, occasionally holding her husband’s arm.

‘I’m at my wit’s end,’ Sir David concluded. ‘We have an older daughter, and she’s perfectly delightful. But Alex? He hangs around the house. He doesn’t read. He doesn’t show any interest in anything. His appearance ... well, you’ll see for yourself. The Point Blanc Academy is our last resort, Mrs. Stellenbosch. We’re desperately hoping you can straighten him out.’

The assistant director poked at the air with her cigar, leaving a gray trail. ‘I’m sure you’ve been a marvelous father, Sir David,’ she purred. ‘But these modern children! It’s heartbreaking the way some of them behave. You’ve done the right thing, coming to us. As I’m sure you know, the academy has had a remarkable success rate over the years.’

‘What exactly do you do?’ Lady Caroline asked.

‘We have our methods.’ The woman’s eyes twinkled.

She tapped ash into her saucer. „But I can promise you, we’ll straighten out all his problems.

Don’t you worry! When he comes home, he’ll be a completely different boy.’

Alex had reached the edge of a field about a half mile from the house. He had seen the helicopter land and knew that his time had come. But he wasn’t ready yet to leave. Mrs. Jones had telephoned him the night before. Once again, MI6 wasn’t going to send him empty-handed into what might be enemy territory.

He watched as a combine harvester rumbled slowly toward him, cutting a swathe through the grass. It jerked to a halt a short distance away, and the door of the cabin opened. A man got out—with difficulty. He was so fat that he had to squeeze himself out, first one buttock, then the next, and finally his stomach, shoulders, and head. The man was wearing a checked shirt and blue overalls—a farmer’s outfit. But even if he’d had a straw hat and a blade of corn between his teeth, Alex could never have imagined him actually farming anything.

The man grinned at him. „Hello, old chap!’ he said.

„Hello, Mr. Smithers,’ Alex replied.

Smithers worked for MI6. He had supplied the various devices Alex had used on his last mission. „Very nice to see you again!’ he exclaimed. He winked. „What do you think of the cover? I was told to blend in with the countryside.’

„The combine harvester’s a great idea,’ Alex said. „Except, this is April. There isn’t anything to harvest.’

„I hadn’t thought of that!’ Smithers beamed. „The trouble is, I’m not really a field agent.

Field agent!’ He looked around him and laughed. „Anyway, I’m jolly glad to have the chance to work with you again, Alex—to think up a few bits and pieces for you. It’s not often I get a teenager. Much more fun than the adults!’

He reached into the cabin and pulled out a suitcase. „Actually, it’s been a bit tricky this time,’ he went on.

„Have you got another Nintendo Game Boy?’ Alex asked.

„No. That’s just it. The school doesn’t allow Game Boys—or any computers at all, for that matter. They supply their own laptops. I could have hidden a dozen gadgets inside a laptop, but there you are! Now, let’s see...’ He opened the case. „I’m told there’s still a lot of snow up at Point Blanc’ so you’ll need this.’

„A ski suit,’ Alex said. That was what Smithers was holding.

„Yes. But it’s highly insulated and also bulletproof.’ He pulled out a pair of green-tinted goggles. „These are ski goggles. But in case you have to go anywhere at night, they’re actually infrared. There’s a battery concealed in the frame. Just press the switch and you’ll be able to see about twenty yards, even if there’s no moon.’

Smithers reached into the case a second time. „Now, what else would a boy of your age have with him? Fortunately, you’re allowed to take a Sony Discman, provided all the CDs are classical.’ He handed Alex the machine.

„So while people are shooting at me in the middle of the night, I get to listen to music,“ Alex said.

„Absolutely. Only don't play the Beethoven!“ Smithers held up the disc. „The Discman converts into an electric saw. The CD is diamond-edged. It'll cut through just about anything—

useful if you need to get out in a hurry. There's also a panic button I've built in. If you're in real trouble and you need help, just press Fast Forward three times. It'll send out a signal that our satellite will pick up. And then we can fast forward you out!“

„Thank you, Mr. Smithers,“ Alex said, but he was disappointed and it showed.

Smithers understood. „I know what you want,“ he said. „But you know you can't have it.

No guns! Mr. Blunt is adamant. He thinks you're too young.“

„Not too young to get killed, though.“

„I know. So I've given it a bit of thought and rustled up a couple of ... defensive measures, so to speak. This is just between you and me, you understand. I'm not sure Mr. Blunt would approve.“

He held out a hand. A gold ear stud lay in two pieces in the middle of his palm: a diamond shape for the front and a catch to hold it at the back. The stud looked tiny surrounded by so much flesh. „They told me you'd had your ear pierced,“ he said. „So I made you this. Be very careful after you've put it in. Bringing the two pieces together will activate it.“

„Activate what?“ Alex looked doubtful.

„The ear stud is a small but very powerful explosive device. Like a miniature grenade.

Separating the two pieces again will set it off. Count to ten and it'll blow a hole in just about anything ... or anyone, I should add.“

„Just so long as it doesn't blow off my ear,“ Alex muttered.

„No, no. It's perfectly safe so long as the pieces remain attached.“ Smithers smiled. „And finally, I'm very pleased with this. It's exactly what you'd expect to find in a young boy's luggage, and I designed it especially for you.“ He had produced a book.

Alex took it. It was a hardcover edition of the latest Harry Potter book. „Thanks,“ he said.

„But I've already read it.“

„This is a special edition. There's a gun built into the spine, and the chamber is loaded with a stun dart. Just point it and press the author's name. It'll knock out an adult in less than five seconds.“

Alex smiled. Smithers climbed back into the combine harvester. For a moment he seemed to have wedged himself permanently into the door, but then with a grunt he managed to go the whole way.

„Good luck, old chap,“ he said. „Come back in one piece! I really do enjoy having you around!“

It was time to go.

Alex's luggage was being loaded into the helicopter, and he was standing next to his new parents, clutching the Harry Potter book. Eva Stellenbosch was waiting for him underneath the rotors. He had been shocked by her appearance, and at first he had tried to hide it. But then he'd relaxed. He didn't have to be polite. Alex Rider might have good manners, but Alex Friend wouldn't give a damn what she thought. He glanced at her scornfully now and noticed that she was watching him carefully as he

said good-bye.

Once again, Sir David Friend acted his part perfectly. ‚Good-bye, Alex,‘ he said. ‚You will write to us and let us know you’re okay?’

‚If you want,‘ Alex said.

Lady Caroline moved forward and kissed him. Alex backed away from her as if embarrassed. He had to admit that she looked genuinely sad.

‚Come, Alex!‘ Mrs. Stellenbosch was in a hurry to get away. She had told him that the helicopter had a range of only four hundred miles and that they would need to stop in Paris to refuel.

And then Fiona appeared, crossing the grass toward them. Alex hadn’t spoken to her for the last two days, not since the business at the tunnel. Nor had she spoken to him. He had rejected her, and he knew she would never forgive him. She hadn’t come down to breakfast this morning, and he’d assumed she wouldn’t show herself again until he’d gone. So what was she doing here now?

Suddenly Alex knew. She’d come to cause trouble—one last jab below the belt. He could see it in her eyes and in the way she flounced across the lawn with her hands rolled into fists.

Fiona didn’t know he was a spy. But she must know that he was here for a reason, and she had probably guessed it had something to do with the woman from Point Blanc. So she had decided to come out and spoil things for him.

Maybe she was going to ask questions. Maybe she was going to give Mrs. Stellenbosch a piece of her mind. Either way, Alex knew that his mission would be over before it had even begun. All his work memorizing the files and all the time he had spent with the family would have been for nothing.

‚Fiona...‘ Sir David muttered. His eyes were grave. He had come to the same conclusion as Alex.

She ignored him. ‚Are you from the academy?’ she asked, speaking directly to Mrs. Stellenbosch.

‚Yes, my dear.‘

‚Well, I think there’s something you should know.‘

There was only one thing Alex could do. He lifted the Harry Potter book and pointed it at Fiona, then pressed the spine once, hard. There was no noise, but he felt the book shudder in his hand. Fiona put her hand to the side of her leg. All the color drained out of her face. She crumpled to the grass.

Lady Caroline ran to her. Mrs. Stellenbosch looked puzzled. Alex turned to her, his face blank. ‚That’s my sister,‘ he said. ‚She gets very emotional.‘

Two minutes later, the helicopter took off. Alex watched through the window as Haverstock Hall got smaller and smaller and then disappeared behind them. He looked at Mrs. Stellenbosch, hunched over the controls, her eyes hidden by her goggles. He eased himself into his chair and let himself be carried away into the darkening sky. Then the clouds rolled in.

The countryside was gone. So was his only weapon. Alex was on his own.

ROOM 13

IT WAS RAINING IN PARIS. The city looked tired and disappointed, the Eiffel Tower fighting against a mass of heavy clouds. There was nobody sitting at the tables outside the cafes, and for once the little kiosks selling paintings and postcards were being ignored by the tourists, who were hurrying back to their hotels. It was five o'clock in the afternoon and the evening was drawing in, unnoticed. The shops and offices were emptying, but the city didn't care. It just wanted to be left alone.

The helicopter had landed in a private area of Charles de Gaulle airport, and a car had been waiting to drive them in. Alex had said nothing during the flight and now he sat on his own in the back, watching the buildings flash by. They were following the Seine, moving surprisingly fast along a wide, two-lane road that dipped above and below the water level. Their route took them past Notre Dame. Then they turned off, weaving their way through a series of back streets with smaller restaurants and boutiques fighting for space on the pavements.

,The Marais,' Mrs. Stellenbosch said to Alex, pointing out the window.

He pretended to show no interest. In fact, he had stayed in the Marais once with his uncle and knew it as one of the most sophisticated and expensive sections in Paris.

The car turned into a large square and stopped. Alex glanced out the window. He was surrounded on four sides by the tall, classical houses for which Paris is famous. But the square had been disfigured by a single modern hotel. It was a white, rectangular block, the windows fitted with dark glass that allowed no view inside. It rose up four floors with a flat roof and the name HOTEL DU MONDE in gold letters above the main door. If a spaceship had landed in the square, crushing a couple of buildings to make room for itself, it couldn't have looked more out of place.

,This is where we're staying,' Mrs. Stellenbosch said. ,The hotel is owned by the academy.'

The driver took their cases out of the trunk. Alex followed the assistant director toward the entrance, the door sliding open automatically to allow them in. The lobby was cold and faceless, white marble and mirrors with a single potted plant tucked into a corner as an afterthought.

There was a small reception desk with an unsmiling male receptionist in a dark suit and glasses, a computer, and a row of pigeonholes. Alex counted them. There were fifteen. Presumably, the hotel had fifteen rooms.

, *Bonsoir*, Madame Stellenbosch.' The receptionist nodded his head slightly. He ignored Alex. ,I hope you had a good journey from England,' he continued, still speaking in French.

Alex gazed blankly, as if he hadn't understood a word. Alex Friend wouldn't speak French. He wouldn't have bothered to learn. But Ian Rider had made certain that his nephew was speaking French almost as soon as he was speaking English. Not to mention German and Spanish as well.

The receptionist took down two keys. He didn't ask either of them to sign in. He didn't ask for a credit card. The school owned the hotel, so there would be no bill when they left. He gave Alex one of the keys.

,I hope you're not superstitious,' he said, speaking in English now.

,No,' Alex replied.

,It is room thirteen. On the first floor. I am sure you will find it most agreeable.' The receptionist smiled.

Mrs. Stellenbosch took her key. ,The hotel has its own restaurant,' she said. Her voice was gravelly and strangely masculine. Her breath smelled of cigar smoke. ,We might as well eat here tonight. We don't want to go out in the rain. Anyway, the food here is excellent. Do you like French food, Alex?'

,Not much,' Alex said.

,Well, I'm sure we'll find something that you like. Why don't you freshen up after the journey?' She looked at her watch. ,We'll eat at seven—an hour and a half from now. It will give us an opportunity to talk together. Might I suggest, perhaps, some neater clothes for dinner? The French are informal, but—if you'll forgive me saying so, my dear—you take informality a little far. I'll call you at five to seven. I hope the room is all right.'

Room 13 was at the end of a long, narrow corridor. The door opened into a surprisingly large space, with views over the square. There was a double bed with a black-and-white comforter, a television and minibar, a desk, and, on the wall, a couple of framed pictures of Paris. A porter had carried up Alex's suitcase, and as soon as he was gone, Alex kicked off his shoes and sat down on the bed. He wondered why they had come here. He knew the helicopter had needed refueling, but that shouldn't have necessitated an overnight stop. Why not fly on straight to the school?

He had more than an hour to kill. First he went into the bathroom—more glass and white marble—and took a long shower. Then, wrapped in a towel, he went back into the room and turned on the television. Alex Friend would watch a lot of television. There were about thirty channels to choose from. Alex skipped past the French ones and stopped on MTV. He wondered if he was being monitored. There was a large mirror next to the desk, and it would be easy enough to conceal a camera behind it. Well, why not give them something to think about?

He opened the minibar and poured himself a glass of gin. Then he went into the bathroom, refilled the bottle with water, and put it back in the fridge. Drinking alcohol and stealing! If she was watching, Madame Stellenbosch would know that she had her hands full with him.

He spent the next forty minutes watching television and pretending to drink the gin. Then he took the glass into the bathroom and dumped it in the sink. It was time to get dressed.

Should he do what he was told and put on neater clothes? In the end, he compromised. He put on a new shirt, but kept the same jeans. A moment later, the telephone rang. His call for dinner.

Mrs. Stellenbosch was waiting for him in the restaurant, a large, airless room in the basement. Soft lighting and mirrors had been used to make it feel more spacious, but it was still the last place Alex would have chosen. The restaurant could have been anywhere, in any part of the world. There were two other diners—businessmen, from the looks of them—but otherwise they were alone. Mrs. Stellenbosch had changed into a black evening dress with feathers at the collar, and she had an antique necklace of black and silver beads. The fancier her clothes, Alex thought, the uglier she looked. She was smoking another cigar.

,Ah, Alex!' She blew smoke. ,Did you have a rest? Or did you watch TV?'

Alex didn't say anything. He sat down and opened the menu, then closed it again when he saw that it

was all in French.

„You must let me order for you. Some soup to start, perhaps? And then a steak. I’ve never yet met a boy who doesn’t like steak.“

„My cousin Oliver is a vegetarian,“ Alex said. It was something he had read in one of the files.

The assistant director nodded as if she already knew this. „Then he doesn’t know what he is missing,“ she said. A palefaced waiter came over and she placed the order in French. „What will you drink?“ she asked.

„I’ll have a Coke.“

„A repulsive drink, I’ve always thought. I have never understood the taste. But of course, you shall have what you want.“

The waiter brought a Coke for Alex and a glass of champagne for Mrs. Stellenbosch. Alex watched the bubbles rising in the two glasses, his black, hers a pale yellow.

„*Sante*.“ she said.

„I’m sorry?“

„It’s French for good health.“

„Oh. Cheers...“

There was a moment’s silence. The woman’s eyes were fixed on him as if she could see right through him. „So you were at Eton,“ she said casually.

„That’s right.“ Alex was suddenly on his guard.

„What house were you in?“

„The Hopgarden.“ It was the name of a real house at the school. Alex had read the file carefully.

„I visited Eton once. I remember a statue. I think it was of a king. It was just through the main gate...“

She was testing him. Alex was sure of it. Did she suspect him? Or was it simply a precaution, something she always did? „You’re talking about Henry the Sixth,“ he said. „His statue’s in College Yard. He founded Eton.“

„But you didn’t like it there.“

„No.“

„Why not?“

„I didn’t like the uniform and I didn’t like the beaks.“ Alex was careful not to use the word *teachers*. At Eton, they’re known as beaks. He half smiled to himself. If she wanted a bit of Eton-speak, he’d give it to her. „And I didn’t like the rules. Getting fined by the Pop. Or being put in the Tardy Book. I was always getting Rips and Infoes ... or being put on the Bill. The divs were boring...“

„I’m afraid I don’t really understand a word you’re saying.“

„Divs are lessons,“ Alex explained. „Rips are when your work is no good.“

„I see!“ She drew a line with her cigar. „Is that why you set fire to the library?“

„No,“ Alex said. „That was just because I don’t like books.“

The first course arrived. Alex’s soup was yellow and had something floating in it. He picked up his spoon and poked at it suspiciously. „What’s this?“ he demanded.

„*Soupe de moules.*“

He looked at her blankly.

„Mussel soup. I hope you enjoy it.“

„I’d have preferred tomato,“ Alex said.

The steaks, when they came, were typically French: barely cooked at all. Alex took a couple of mouthfuls of the bloody meat, then threw down his knife and fork and used his fingers to eat all the french fries. Mrs. Stellenbosch talked to him about the French Alps, about skiing, and about her visits to various European cities. It was easy to look bored. He *was* bored. And he was beginning to feel tired. He took a sip of Coke, hoping the cold drink would wake him up. The meal seemed to be dragging on all night.

But at last the desserts—ice cream with white chocolate sauce—had come and gone. Alex declined coffee.

„You’re looking tired,“ Mrs. Stellenbosch said. She lit another cigar. The smoke curled around her head and made him feel dizzy. „Would you like to go to bed?“

„Yes.“

„We don’t need to leave until midday tomorrow. You’ll have time for a visit to the Louvre, if you’d like that.“

Alex shook his head. „Actually, paintings bore me.“

„Really? What a shame!“

Alex stood up. Somehow his hand knocked into his glass, spilling the rest of the Coke over the pristine white tablecloth. What was the matter with him? Suddenly he was exhausted.

„Would you like me to come up with you, Alex?“ the woman asked. She was looking carefully at him, a tiny glimmer of interest in her otherwise dead eyes.

„No. I’ll be all right.“ Alex stepped away. „Good night.“

Getting upstairs was an ordeal. He was tempted to take the elevator, but he didn’t want to lock himself into that small, windowless cubicle. He would have felt suffocated. He climbed the stairs, his shoulders resting heavily against the wall. Then he stumbled down the corridor and somehow got his key into the lock. When he finally got inside, the room was spinning. What was going on? Had he drunk more of the gin than he had intended, or was he ...?

Alex swallowed. He had been drugged. There had been something in the Coke. It was still on his tongue, a sort of bitterness. There were only three steps between him and his bed, but it could have been a mile away. His legs wouldn’t obey him anymore. just lifting one foot took all his strength. He fell forward, reaching out with his arms. Somehow he managed to propel himself far enough. His chest and shoulders hit the bed, sinking into the mattress. The room was spinning around him, faster and faster. He tried to stand up, tried to speak—but nothing came. His eyes closed. Gratefully, he

allowed the darkness to take him.

Thirty minutes later, there was a soft click and the room began to change.

If Alex had been able to open his eyes, he would have seen the desk, the minibar, and the framed pictures of Paris begin to rise up the wall. Or so it might have seemed to him. But in fact the walls weren't moving. It was the floor that was sinking downward on hidden hydraulics, taking the bed—with Alex on it—into the depths of the hotel. The entire room was nothing more than a huge elevator that carried him, one inch at a time, into the basement and beyond.

Now the walls were metal sheets. He had left the wallpaper, the lights, and the pictures high above him. He was dropping through what might have been a ventilation shaft with four steel rods guiding him to the bottom. Brilliant lights suddenly flooded over him. There was a soft click. He had arrived.

The bed had come to rest in the center of a gleaming underground clinic. Scientific equipment crowded in on him from all sides. There were a number of cameras: digital, video, infrared, and X-ray. There were instruments of all shapes and sizes, most of them unrecognizable to anyone without a science degree. A tangle of wires spiraled out from each machine to a bank of computers that hummed and blinked on a long worktable against one of the walls. A glass window had been cut into the wall on the other side. The room was air-conditioned. Had Alex been awake, he might have shivered in the cold. His breath appeared as a faint white cloud, hovering around his mouth.

A plump man wearing a white coat had been waiting to receive him. The man, who was about forty, had yellow hair that he wore slicked back, and a face that was rapidly sinking into middle age, with puffy cheeks and a thick, fatty neck. The man had glasses and a small mustache. Two assistants were with him, also wearing white coats. Their faces were blank.

The three of them set to work at once. Handling Alex as if he were a sack of vegetables—or a corpse—they picked him up and stripped off all his clothes. Then they began to photograph him, beginning with a conventional camera. Starting at his toes, they moved upward, clicking off at least a hundred pictures, the flash igniting and the film automatically advancing. Not one inch of his body escaped their examination. A lock of his hair was snipped off and put into a plastic envelope. An ophthalmoscope was used to produce a perfect image of the back of his eye.

They made a mold of his teeth, slipping a piece of putty into his mouth and manipulating his chin to make him bite down. They made a careful note of the birthmark on his left shoulder, the scar on his arm, and even the ends of his fingers. Alex bit his nails; that was recorded too.

Finally, they weighed him on a large, flat scale and then measured him—his height, chest size, waist, inside leg, hand size, and so on—making a note in their books of every measurement.

And all the time, Mrs. Stellenbosch watched from the other side of the window. She never moved. The only sign of life anywhere in her face was the cigar, clamped between her lips. It glowed red, and the smoke trickled up.

The three men had finished. The one with the yellow hair spoke into a microphone. 'We're all finished, he said.

'Give me your opinion, Mr. Baxter.' The woman's voice echoed out of a speaker concealed behind the wall.

'It's a cinch.' The man called Baxter was English. He spoke with an upper-class accent, and he was

obviously pleased with himself. ‚He’s got a good bone structure. Very fit. Interesting face. You notice the pierced ear? He’s had that done recently. Nothing else to say, really.‘

‚When will you operate?‘

‚Whenever you say, old girl. Just let me know.‘

Mrs. Stellenbosch turned to the other two men. ‚*Envoyez lui!*‘ She snapped the two words.

The two assistants put Alex’s clothes back on him. This took longer than taking them off. As they worked, they made a careful note of all the brand names. The Quiksilver T-shirt. The Gap socks. By the time they had dressed him, they knew as much about him as a doctor knows about a newborn baby. It had all been noted down.

Mr. Baxter walked over to the worktable and pressed a button. At once, the carpet, bed, and hotel furniture began to rise up. They disappeared through the ceiling and kept going. Alex slept on as he was carried back through the shaft, finally arriving in the space that he knew as room 13.

There was nothing to show what had happened. The whole experience had evaporated, as quickly as a dream.

“MY NAME IS GRIEF”

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THE ACADEMY AT POINT Blanc had been built by a lunatic. For a time it had been used as an asylum. Alex remembered what Alan Blunt had told him as the helicopter began its final descent, the red and white helipad looming up to receive it. The photograph in the brochure had been artfully taken. Now that he could see the building for himself, he could only describe it as ... crazy.

It was a jumble of towers and battlements, green sloping roofs and windows of every shape and size. Nothing fitted together properly. The overall design should have been simple enough: a circular central area with two wings. But one wing was longer than the other. The two sides didn’t match. The academy was four floors high, but the windows were spaced in such a way that it was hard to tell where one floor ended and the next began. There was an internal courtyard that wasn’t quite square, with a fountain that had frozen solid. Even the helipad, jutting out of the roof, was ugly and awkward, as if someone had thrown a giant Frisbee that had smashed into the brickwork and lodged in place.

Mrs. Stellenbosch flicked off the controls. ‚I will take you down to meet the director,‘ she shouted over the noise of the blades. ‚Your luggage will be brought down later.‘

It was cold on the roof. Although it was almost the end of April, the snow covering the mountain still hadn’t melted and everything was white for as far as the eye could see. The academy was built into the side of a steep slope. A little farther down, Alex saw a big iron tongue that started at ground level but then curved outward as the mountainside dropped away. It was a ski jump—the sort of thing he had seen at the winter Olympics. The end of the curve was at least fifty feet above the ground, and far below, Alex could make out a flat area, shaped like a horseshoe, where the jumpers were meant to land.

He was staring at it, imagining what it would be like to propel yourself into space with only two skis to break your fall, when the woman grabbed his arm. ‚We don’t use it,‘ she said. ‚It is forbidden. Come now! Let’s get out of the cold.‘

They went through a door in the side of one of the towers and down a narrow spiral staircase (each step a different distance apart) that took them all the way to the ground floor.

Now they were in a long, narrow corridor with plenty of doors but no windows.

„Classrooms,“ Mrs. Stellenbosch explained. „You will see them later.“

Alex followed her through the strangely silent building. The central heating had been turned up high inside the academy, and the atmosphere was warm and heavy. They stopped at a pair of modern glass doors that opened into the courtyard Alex had seen from above. From the heat back into the cold again, Mrs. Stellenbosch led him through the doors and past the frozen fountain. A movement caught his eye, and Alex glanced up. This was something he hadn't noticed before. A sentry stood on one of the towers. He had a pair of binoculars around his neck and a submachine gun slung across one arm.

Armed guards? In a school? Alex had been here only a few minutes and already he was unnerved.

„Through here!“ Mrs. Stellenbosch opened another door for him, and he found himself in the main reception hall of the academy. A log fire burned in a massive fireplace with two stone dragons guarding the flames. A grand staircase led upward. The hall was lit by a chandelier with at least a hundred bulbs. The walls were paneled with wood. The carpet was thick, dark red. A dozen pairs of eyes followed Alex as he followed Mrs. Stellenbosch down the next corridor. The hall was decorated with animal heads: a rhino, an antelope, a water buffalo, and, saddest of all, a lion. Alex wondered who had shot them.

They came to a single door that suggested they had come to the end of their journey. So far, Alex hadn't encountered any boys, but glancing out of the window, he saw two more guards marching slowly past, both of them cradling automatic machine guns.

Mrs. Stellenbosch knocked on the door.

„Come in!“ Even with just two words, Alex caught the South African accent.

The door opened, and they went into a huge room that made no sense. Like the rest of the building, its shape was irregular, none of the walls running parallel. The ceiling was about fifty feet high with windows running the whole way and giving an impressive view of the slopes.

The room was modern with soft lighting coming from units concealed in the walls. The furniture was ugly, but not as ugly as the animal heads on the walls and the zebra skin on the wood floor. There were three chairs next to a small fireplace. One of them was gold and antique. A man was sitting in it. His head turned as Alex came in.

„Good afternoon, Alex,“ he said. „Please come and sit down.“

Alex sauntered into the room and took one of the chairs. Mrs. Stellenbosch sat in the other.

„My name is Grief,“ the man continued. „Dr. Grief. I am very pleased to meet you and to have you here.“

Alex stared at the man who was the director of Point Blanc, at the white-paper skin and the eyes burning behind the red eyeglasses. It was like meeting a skeleton, and for a moment he was lost for words. Then he recovered. „Nice place,“ he said.

„Do you think so?“ There was no emotion whatsoever in Grief's voice. So far he had moved only his

neck. ,This building was designed in 1857 by a Frenchman who was certainly the world's worst architect. This was his only commission. When the first owners moved in, they had him shot.'

,There are still quite a few people here with guns.' Alex glanced out of the window as another pair of guards walked past.

,Point Blanc is unique,' Dr. Grief explained. ,As you will soon discover, all the boys who have been sent here come from families of great wealth and importance. We have had the sons of emperors and industrialists. Boys like yourself. It follows that we could very easily become a target for terrorists. The guards are therefore here for your protection.'

,That's very kind of you.' Alex felt he was being too polite. It was time to show this man what sort of person he was meant to be. ,But to be honest, I don't really want to be here myself.

So if you'll just tell me how I get down into town, maybe I can get the next train home.'

,There is no way down into town.' Dr. Grief lifted a hand to stop Alex from interrupting.

Alex glanced at his long skeletal fingers and at the eyes glinting red behind the glasses. The man moved as if every bone in his body had been broken and then put back together again.

,The skiing season is over. It's too dangerous now. There is only the helicopter, and that will take you from here only when I say so.' The hand lowered itself again. ,You are here, Alex, because you have disappointed your parents. You were expelled from school. You have had difficulties with the police.'

,That wasn't my bloody fault!' Alex protested.

,Don't interrupt the doctor!' Mrs. Stellenbosch said.

Alex glanced at her balefully.

,Your appearance is displeasing,' Dr. Grief went on. ,Your language also. It is our job to turn you into a boy of whom your parents can be proud.'

,I'm happy as I am,' Alex said.

,That is of no relevance.' Dr. Grief fell silent.

Alex shivered. There was something about this room, so big, so empty, so twisted out of shape. And this man who was both old and young at the same time but who somehow wasn't completely human.

,So what are you going to do with me?' Alex asked.

,There will be no lessons to begin with,' Mrs. Stellenbosch said. ,For the first couple of weeks we want you to assimilate.'

,What does that mean?'

,To assimilate. To conform ... to adapt ... to become like.' It was as if she were reading out of a dictionary. ,There are six boys at the academy at the moment. You will meet them and you will spend time with them. There will be opportunities for sports and for being social. There is a good library here, and you will read. Soon you will learn our methods.'

,I want to call my mom and dad,' Alex said.

,The use of telephones is forbidden,' Mrs. Stellenbosch explained. She tried to smile sympathetically,

but with her face it wasn't quite possible. 'We find it makes our students homesick,' she went on. 'Of course, you may write letters if you wish.'

'I prefer e-mail,' Alex said.

'For the same reason, e-mail is not permitted.'

Alex shrugged and swore under his breath.

Dr. Grief had seen him. 'You will be polite to the assistant director,' he snapped. He hadn't raised his voice, but the words had an acid tone. 'You should be aware, Alex, that Mrs. Stellenbosch has worked with me now for twenty-six years and that when I met her she had been voted Miss South Africa five years in a row.'

Alex glanced at the hostile face. 'A beauty contest?' he asked.

'The weight-lifting championships.' Dr. Grief glanced at the fireplace. 'Show him,' he said.

Mrs. Stellenbosch got up and went over to the fireplace. There was a poker lying in the grate. She took it with both hands. For a moment she seemed to concentrate. Alex gasped. The solid metal poker, almost two inches thick, was slowly bending. Now it was U-shaped.

Mrs. Stellenbosch wasn't even sweating. She brought the two ends together and dropped it back into the grate. It clanged against the stone.

'We enforce strict discipline here at the academy,' Dr. Grief said. 'Bedtime is at ten o'clock—not a minute past. We do not tolerate bad language. You will have no contact with the outside world without our permission. You will not attempt to leave. And you will do as you are told instantly, without hesitation. And finally...' He leaned toward Alex. 'You are permitted only in certain parts of this building.' He gestured with a hand, and for the first time Alex noticed a second door at the far end of the room. 'My private quarters are through there.'

You will remain on the first and second floors only. That is where the bedrooms and classrooms are located. The third and fourth floors are out of bounds. The basement also. This again is for your safety.'

'You're afraid I'll trip on the stairs?' Alex asked.

Dr. Grief ignored him. 'You may leave,' he said.

'Wait outside the office, Alex,' Mrs. Stellenbosch said. 'Someone will be along to get you.'

Alex stood up.

'We will make you into what your parents want,' Dr. Grief said.

'Maybe they don't want me at all.'

'We can arrange that too.'

Alex left.

'An unpleasant boy ... a few days ... faster than usual ... the Gemini Project ... closing down...'

If the door hadn't been so thick, Alex would have been able to hear more. The moment he had left the room he had cupped his ear against the keyhole, hoping to pick up something that might be useful to

MI6. Sure enough, Dr. Grief and Mrs. Stellenbosch were busily talking on the other side, but Alex heard little and understood less.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder and he twisted around, annoyed with himself. A so-called spy caught listening at keyholes! But it wasn't one of the guards. Alex found himself looking up at a round-faced boy with long, dark hair, dark blue eyes, and pale skin. He was wearing a very old Star Wars T-shirt, torn jeans, and a baseball cap. Recently he had been in a fight, and it looked like he'd gotten the worst of it. There was a bruise around one of his eyes and a gash on his lip.

'They'll shoot you if they catch you listening at doors,' the boy said. He looked at Alex with hostile eyes. Alex guessed that he was the sort of boy who wouldn't trust anyone easily. 'I'm James Sprintz,' he said. 'They told me to show you around.'

'Alex Friend.'

'So what did you do to get sent to this dump?' James asked as they walked down the corridor.

'I got expelled from Eton.'

'I got thrown out of a school in Dusseldorf.' James sighed. 'I thought it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Until my dad sent me here.'

'What does your dad do?' Alex asked.

'He's a banker. He plays the money markets. He loves money and he has lots of it.' James's voice was flat and unemotional.

'Dieter Sprintz?' Alex remembered the name. He'd made the front page of every newspaper in England a few years before. The hundred-million-dollar man. That was how much he had made in just twenty-four hours. At the same time, the pound had crashed and the British government had almost collapsed.

'Yeah. Don't ask me to show you a photograph, because I don't have one. This way...'

They had reached the main hall with the dragon fireplace. From here, James showed him into the dining room, a long, high-ceilinged room with six tables and a window leading into the kitchen. After that, they visited two living rooms, a games room, and a library. The academy reminded Alex of a ski resort—and not just because of its setting. There was a sort of heaviness about the place, a sense of being cut off from the real world. The air was warm and silent, and despite the size of the rooms, Alex couldn't help feeling claustrophobic. Grief had said that there were only six boys currently at the school. The building could have housed sixty. Empty space was everywhere.

There was nobody in either of the living rooms—just a collection of armchairs, desks, and tables—but they found a couple of boys in the library. This was a long, narrow room with old-fashioned oak shelves lined with books in a variety of languages. A suit of medieval Swiss armor stood in an alcove at the far end.

'This is Tom. And Hugo,' James said. 'They're probably doing extra math or something, so we'd better not disturb them.'

The two boys looked up and nodded briefly. One of them was reading a textbook. The other had been writing. They were both much better dressed than James and didn't look very friendly.

,Creeps,' James said as soon as they had left the room.

,In what way?'

,When I was told about this place, they said all the kids had problems. I thought it was going to be wild. Do you have a cigarette?'

,I don't smoke.'

,Great, another one... I get here and it's like a museum or a monastery or ... I don't know what. It looks like Dr. Grief's been busy. Everyone's quiet, hardworking, boring. God knows how he did it. Sucked their brains out with a straw or something. A couple of weeks ago I got into a fight with a couple of them, just for the hell of it.' He pointed to his face. ,They beat the crap out of me and then went back to their studies. Really creepy!'

They went into the games room, which contained table tennis, darts, a wide-screen TV, and a snooker table. ,Don't try playing snooker,' James said. ,The room's on a slant and all the balls roll the wrong way.'

Then they went upstairs, where the boys had their study-bedrooms. Each one contained a bed, an armchair, a television (,It shows only the programs Dr. Grief wants you to see,' James said), a bureau, and a desk. A second door led into a small bathroom with a toilet and shower.

None of the rooms was locked.

,We're not allowed to lock them,' James explained. ,We're all stuck here with nowhere to go, so nobody bothers to steal anything. I heard that Hugo Vries—the boy in the library—used to steal anything he could get his hands on. He was arrested for shoplifting in Amsterdam.'

,But not anymore?'

,He's another success story. He's flying home next week. His father owns diamond mines.

Why bother shoplifting when you can afford to buy the whole shop?'

Alex's study was at the end of the corridor, with views over the ski jump. His suitcases had already been carried up and were waiting for him on the bed. Everything felt very bare, but according to James, the study-bedrooms were the only part of the school the boys were allowed to decorate themselves. They could choose their own bedspreads and cover the walls with their own posters.

,They say it's important that you express yourself,' James said. ,If you haven't brought anything with you, Miss Stomach-bag will take you into Grenoble.'

,Stomach-bag?'

,Mrs. Stellenbosch. That's my name for her.'

,What do the other boys call her?'

,They call her Mrs. Stellenbosch.' James sighed. ,I'm telling you—this is a deeply weird place, Alex. I've been to a lot of schools because I've been thrown out of a lot of schools. But this one is the pits. I've been here for six weeks now and I've hardly had any lessons. They have music evenings and discussion evenings and they try to get me to read. But otherwise, I've been left on my own.'

,They want you to assimilate,' Alex said, remembering what Dr. Grief had said.

,That's their word for it. But this place ... they may call it a school, but it's more like being in prison. You've seen the guards. '

,I thought they were here to protect us.'

,If you think that, you're a bigger idiot than I thought. Think about it! There are about thirty of them. Thirty armed guards for seven kids? That's not protection. That's intimidation.' James paused by the door. He examined Alex for a second time. ,It would be nice to think that someone has finally arrived who I can relate to,' he said,

,Maybe you can,' Alex said.

,Yeah. But for how long?'

James left, closing the door behind him.

Alex began to unpack. The bulletproof ski suit and infrared goggles were at the top of the first suitcase. It didn't look as if he would be needing them. It wasn't as if he even had any skis.

Then came the Discman. He remembered the instructions Smithers had given him. ,*If you're in real trouble, just press Fast Forward three times.*' He was almost tempted to do it now. There was something unsettling about the academy. He could feel it even now, in his room. He was like a goldfish in a bowl. Looking up, he almost expected to see a pair of huge eyes looming over him, and he knew that they would be wearing red-tinted glasses. He weighed the Discman in his hand. He couldn't hit the panic button—yet. He had nothing to report back to MI6. There was nothing to connect the school with the deaths of the two men in New York and the Black Sea.

But if there was anything, he knew where he would find it. Why were two whole floors of the building out of bounds? It made no sense at all. Presumably the guards slept up there, but even though Dr. Grief seemed to employ a small army, that would still leave a lot of empty rooms. The third and fourth floors. If something was going on at the academy, it had to be going on up there.

A bell sounded downstairs. Alex shut his suitcase, left his room, and walked down the corridor. He saw another couple of boys walking ahead of him, talking quietly together. Like the boys he had seen in the library, they were clean and well dressed with hair cut short and neatly groomed. Really creepy, James had said. Even on first sight, Alex had to agree.

He reached the main staircase. The two boys had gone down. Alex glanced in their direction, then went up. The staircase turned a corner and stopped. Ahead of him was a sheet of metal that rose up from the floor to the ceiling and all the way across, blocking off the view. The wall had been added recently, like the helipad. Someone had carefully and deliberately cut the building in two.

There was a door set in the metal wall and beside it a keypad with nine buttons demanding a code. Alex reached for the door handle, his hand closing around it. He didn't expect the door to open—nor did he expect what happened next. The moment his fingers came into contact with the handle, an alarm went off, a shrieking siren that echoed throughout the building. A few seconds later, he heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to find two guards facing him, their guns half raised.

Neither of them spoke. One of them ran past him and punched a code into the keypad. The alarm stopped. And then Mrs. Stellenbosch was there, hurrying forward on her short, muscular legs.

,Alex!' she exclaimed. Her eyes were filled with suspicion. ,What are you doing here? The director

told you that the upper floors are forbidden.'

,Yeah ... well, I forgot.' Alex looked straight at her. ,I heard the bell go and I was on my way to the dining room.'

,The dining room is downstairs.'

,Right.'

Alex walked past the two guards, who stepped aside to let him pass. He felt Mrs. Stellenbosch watching him while he went. Metal doors, alarms, and guards with machine guns. What were they trying to hide? And then he remembered something else. The Gemini Project. Those were the words he had heard when he was listening at Dr. Grief's door. Gemini.

The twins. One of the twelve star signs. But what did it mean? Turning the question over his mind, Alex went down to meet the rest of the students.

THINGS THAT GO CLICK IN THE NIGHT

[« ^ »](#)

AT THE END OF HIS FIRST week at Point Blanc, Alex drew up a list of the six boys with whom he shared the school. It was midafternoon, and he was alone in his room. A notepad was open in front of him. It had taken him about half an hour to put together the names and the few details that he had. He only wished he had more.

HUGO VRIES (14) Dutch. Lives in Amsterdam. Brown hair, green eyes. Father's name, Rudi. Owns diamond mines. Speaks little English. Reads and plays guitar. Very solitary. Sent to PB for major shoplifting and arson.

TOM MCMORIN (14) Canadian. From Vancouver. Parents divorced. Mother runs media empire (newspapers, TV). Reddish hair, blue eyes. Well built, chess player. Car thefts and drunken driving ... sent to PB.

NICOLAS MARC (14) French ... from Bordeaux? Expelled from private school in Paris, cause unknown. Drugs? Brown hair, brown eyes, very fit all around. Tattoo of devil on left shoulder. Good at sports. Father = Anthony Marc. Airlines, pop music, hotels. Never mentions his mother.

CASSIAN JAMES (14) American. Fair hair, brown eyes. Mother = Jill ... studio chief in Hollywood. Parents divorced. Writes poetry, plays jazz piano. Expelled from six schools.

Various drugs offenses. Sent to PB after smuggling arrest. Tells jokes. Seems popular.

JOE CANTERBURY (14) American. Spends much of his time with Cassian. Brown hair, blue eyes. Mother (name unknown) New York senator. Father something major at the Pentagon.

Vandalism, truancy, shoplifting. Claims to have own motorbike and three girlfriends (!) in Los Angeles.

JAMES SPRINTZ (14) German. Father = Dieter Sprintz, banker, well-known financier (the hundred-million-dollar man). Mother living in England. Brown hair, dark blue eyes, pale. Lives in Dusseldorf. Expelled for wounding a teacher with an air pistol. Closest I've got to a friend at PB—the only one who really hates it here.

Lying on his bed, Alex studied the list. What did it tell him? Not a great deal.

First, all the boys were the same age: fourteen, the same age as him. At least three of them, and possibly four, had parents who were either divorced or separated. They all came from hugely wealthy backgrounds. Blunt had already told him that was the case, but Alex was surprised by just how diverse the parents were. Airlines, diamonds, politics, and movies.

France, Holland, Canada, and America. Each one of them was at the top of his or her field, and those fields covered just about every human activity. He himself was supposed to be the son of a supermarket king. Food. That was another world industry he could check off.

At least two of the boys had been arrested for shoplifting. Two had been involved with drugs. But Alex knew that the list somehow hid more than it revealed. With the exception of James, it was hard to pin down what made the boys at Point Blanc different. In a strange way, they all looked the same.

Their eyes and hair were different colors. They wore different clothes. All the faces were different: Tom handsome and confident, Joe quiet and watchful. And of course they spoke not only with different voices but also in several languages. James had talked about brains being sucked out with straws, and he had a point. It was as if the same consciousness had somehow invaded them all. They had become puppets, dancing on the same string.

The bell rang downstairs. Alex looked at his watch. It was exactly one o'clock—lunchtime.

That was another thing about the school. Everything was done to the exact minute. Lessons from nine until twelve. Lunch from one to two. And so on. James made a point of being late for everything, and Alex had taken to joining him. It was a tiny rebellion but a satisfying one. It showed they still had a little control over their own lives. The other boys, of course, turned up like clockwork. They would be in the dining room now, waiting quietly for the food to be served.

Alex rolled over on the bed and reached for a pen. He wrote a single word on the pad, underneath the names.

BRAINWASHING?

Maybe that was the answer. According to James, the other boys had arrived at the academy two months before him. He had been there for just three weeks. That added up to just eleven weeks in total, and Alex knew that you didn't take a bunch of delinquents and turn them into perfect students just by giving them good books. Dr. Grief had to be doing something else.

Drugs. Hypnosis. Something.

He waited five more minutes, then hid the notepad under his mattress and left the room. He wished he could lock the door. There was no privacy at Point Blanc. Even the bathrooms had no locks. And Alex still couldn't shake off the feeling that everything he did, even everything he thought, was somehow being monitored, noted down. Evidence to be used against him.

It was ten past one when he reached the dining room, and sure enough, the other boys were already there, eating their lunch and talking quietly among themselves. Nicolas and Cassian were at one table. Hugo, Tom, and Joe were at another. Nobody was flicking peas. Nobody even had their elbows on the table. Tom was talking about a visit he had made to some museum in Grenoble. Alex had been in the room only a few seconds, but already his appetite had gone.

James had arrived just ahead of him and was standing at one of the windows into the kitchen, helping himself to food. Most of the food arrived precooked, and one of the guards heated it up. Today it was stew. Alex got his lunch and sat next to James. The two of them had their own table. They had become friends quite effortlessly. Everyone else ignored them.

,You want to go out after lunch?' James asked.

,Sure. Why not?'

,There's something I want to talk to you about.'

Alex looked past James at the other boys. There was Tom, at the head of the table, reaching out for a pitcher of water. He was dressed in a polo shirt and jeans. Next to him was Joe Canterbury. He was talking to Hugo now, waving a finger to emphasize a point. Where had Alex seen that movement before? Cassian was just behind them, round faced, with fine, light brown hair, laughing at a joke.

Different but the same. Watching them closely, Alex tried to figure out what he meant.

It was all in the details, the things you wouldn't notice unless you saw them all together, like they were now. The way they were all sitting with their backs straight and their elbows close to their sides. The way they held their knives and forks. Hugo laughed, and Alex realized that for a moment he had become a mirror image of Cassian. It was the same laugh. He watched Joe eat a mouthful of food. Then he watched Nicolas. They were two different boys. There was no doubting that. But they ate in the same way, as if mimicking each other.

There was a movement at the door, and suddenly Mrs. Stellenbosch appeared. ,Good afternoon, boys,' she said.

,Good afternoon, Mrs. Stellenbosch.' Five people answered, but Alex heard only one voice.

He and James had remained silent.

,Lessons this afternoon will begin at three o'clock. The subjects will be Latin and French.'

The lessons were taught by Dr. Grief or Mrs. Stellenbosch. There were no other teachers at the school.

Alex hadn't yet been taught anything. James dipped in and out of class, depending on his mood.

,There will be a discussion this evening in the library,' Mrs. Stellenbosch went on. ,The subject is violence in television and film. Tom, you will open the debate. Afterward, there will be hot chocolate, and Dr. Grief will give a lecture on the works of Mozart. Everyone is welcome to attend.'

James jabbed a finger into his open mouth and stuck out his tongue. Alex smiled. The other boys were listening quietly.

,Dr. Grief would also like to congratulate Cassian James on winning the poetry competition.

His poem is pinned to the bulletin board in the main hall. That is all.'

She turned and left the room. James rolled his eyes. ,Let's go out and get some fresh air,' he said. ,I'm feeling sick.'

The two of them went upstairs and put on their coats. James had the room next door to Alex and had done his best to make it more homey. There were posters of old sci-fi movies on the wall and a

mobile with the solar system dangling above the bed. A lava lamp bubbled and swirled on the bedside table, casting an orange glow. There were clothes everywhere. James obviously didn't believe in hanging them up. Somehow he managed to find a scarf and a single glove. He shoved one hand into a pocket. 'Let's go,' he said.

They went back down and along the corridor, passing the games room. Nicolas and Cassian were playing table tennis, and Alex stopped at the door to watch them. The ball was bouncing back and forth, and Alex found himself mesmerized. He stood there for about sixty seconds, watching. Kerplink, kerplunk, kerplink, kerplunk-neither of the boys was scoring. There it was again. Different but the same. Obviously, there were two boys there. But the way they played, the style of their game, was identical. If it had been one boy knocking a ball against a mirror, the result would have looked much the same. Alex shivered. James was standing at his shoulder.

The two of them moved away.

Hugo was sitting in the library. The boy who had been sent to Point Blanc for shoplifting was reading a Dutch edition of *National Geographic* magazine. They reached the hall, and there was Cassian's poem, prominently pinned to the bulletin board. He had been sent to Point Blanc for smuggling drugs. Now he was writing about daffodils.

Alex pushed open the main door and felt the cold wind hit his face. He was grateful for it.

He needed to be reminded that there was a real world outside this bizarre goldfish bowl.

It had begun to snow again. The two boys walked slowly around the building. A couple of guards walked toward them, speaking softly in German. Alex had counted thirty guards at Point Blanc, all of them young German men, dressed in uniform black roll-neck sweaters and black vests. The guards never spoke to the boys. They had the pale, unhealthy faces and close-cropped hair he would have expected. Dr. Grief had said they were there for his protection, but Alex still wondered. Were they here to keep intruders out, or the boys in?

'This way,' James said.

James walked ahead, his feet sinking into the thick snow. Alex followed, looking back at the windows on the third and fourth floors. It was maddening. A whole half of the castleperhaps more-was closed off to him, and he still couldn't think of a way of getting up to it. He couldn't climb. The brickwork was too smooth and there was no convenient ivy to provide handholds.

The drainpipes looked too fragile to take his weight.

Something moved. Alex stopped in his tracks.

'What is it?' James asked.

'There!' Alex pointed at the third floor. He thought he'd seen a figure, watching them from behind the window directly above his room. It was there for only a moment. The face seemed to be masked. A white mask with a narrow slit for the eyes. But even as he pointed, the figure stepped back, out of sight.

'I don't see anything,' James said.

'It's gone.'

They walked on, heading for the abandoned ski jump. According to James, the jump had been built just before Grief had bought the academy. There had been plans to turn the building into a winter sports training center. The jump had never been used. They reached the wooden barriers that lay across the entrance and stopped.

„Let me ask you something,“ James said. His breath was misting in the cold air. „What do you think of this place?“

„Why do we have to talk out here?“ Alex asked. Despite his coat, he was beginning to shiver.

„Because when I’m inside the building, I get the feeling that someone is listening to every word I say.“

Alex nodded. „I know what you mean.“ He considered the question James had put to him.

„I think you were right the first day we met,“ he said. „This place is creepy.“

„So how would you feel about getting out of here?“

„You know how to fly the helicopter?“

„No. But I’m going.“ James paused and looked around. The two guards had gone into the school. There was nobody else in sight. „I can trust you, Alex, because you’ve just gotten here.

He hasn’t gotten to you yet.“ Dr. Grief. James didn’t need to say the name. „But believe me,“ he went on, „it won’t be long. If you stay here, you’re going to end up like the others. Model students. That’s exactly the word for them. It’s like they’re all made out of plastic. Well, I’ve had enough. I’m not going to let him do that to me.“

„Are you going to run away?“ Alex asked.

„Who needs to run?“ James looked down the slope. „I’m going to ski.“

Alex looked at the slope. It plunged steeply down, stretching on forever. „Is that possible?“

he asked. „I thought—“

„I know Grief says it’s too dangerous. But he would, wouldn’t he? It’s true that it’s expert black runs all the way down, and there’s bound to be tons of moguls...“

„Won’t the snow have melted?“

„Only farther down.“ James pointed. „I’ve been right down to the bottom,“ he said. „I did it the first week I was here. All the slopes run into a single valley. It’s called La Vallee de Fer. You can’t actually make it as far as the town because there’s a train track that cuts across. But if I can get to the track, I reckon I can walk the rest of the way.“

„And then?“

„A train back to Dusseldorf. If my dad tries to send me back here, I’ll go to my mom in England. If she doesn’t want me, I’ll disappear. I’ve got friends in Paris and Berlin. I don’t care.

All I know is, I’ve got to split, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll come too.“

Alex considered. He was almost tempted to join the other boy, if only to help him on his way. But he had a job to do. „I don’t have any skis,“ he said.

„Nor do I.“ James spat into the snow. „Grief took all the skis when the season ended. He’s got them

locked up somewhere.’

‘On the third floor?’

‘Maybe. But I’ll find them. And then I’m out of here.’ He reached out to Alex with his ungloved hand.

‘Come with me.’

Alex shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, James. You go, and good luck to you. But I’ll stick it out a bit longer. I don’t want to break my neck.’

‘Okay. That’s your choice. I’ll send you a postcard.’

The two of them walked back toward the school. Alex gestured at the window where he had seen the masked face. ‘Have you ever wondered what goes on up there?’ he asked.

‘No.’ James shrugged. ‘I suppose that’s where the guards live.’

‘Two whole floors?’

‘There’s a basement as well. And Dr. Grief’s rooms. Do you think he sleeps with Miss Stomach-bag?’ James made a face. ‘That’s a pretty gross thought, the two of them together.’

Darth Vader and King Kong. Well, I’m going to find my skis and get out of here, Alex. And if you’ve got any sense, you’ll come too.’

Alex and James were skiing together down the slope, the blades cutting smoothly through the surface snow. It was a perfect night—everything frozen and still. They had left the academy behind them. But then Alex saw the figure ahead of them. Dr. Grief was there. He was standing motionless, wearing his dark suit, his eyes hidden by his round wire glasses. Alex veered away from him. He had lost control. He was moving faster and faster down the slope, his poles flailing at the air, his skis refusing to turn. He could see the ski jump ahead of him. Someone had removed the barriers. He felt his skis leave the snow and shoot forward onto solid ice. And then it was a screaming drop down, tearing ever farther into the night, knowing there was no way back. Dr. Grief laughed, and at the same moment there was a click and Alex was shot into space, spinning a mile above the ground and then falling, falling, falling ...

He woke up.

He was lying in bed, the moonlight spilling onto his covers. He looked at his watch. A quarter past two. He played back the dream he had just had. Trying to escape with James. Dr.

Grief waiting for them. He had to admit, the academy was beginning to get to him. He didn’t usually have bad dreams. But the school and the people in it were slipping under his skin, working their way into his mind.

He thought about what he had heard. Dr. Grief laughing and something else ... a clicking sound. That was strange. What had gone click? Had it actually been part of the dream?

Suddenly, Alex was completely awake. He got out of bed, went to the door, and turned the handle. He was right. He hadn’t imagined the sound. While he was asleep, the door had been locked from the outside.

Something had to be happening—and Alex was determined to see what it was. He got dressed as quickly as possible, then knelt down and examined the lock. He could make out two bolts, at least a

half inch in diameter, one at the top and one at the bottom. They must have been activated automatically. One thing was sure: he wasn't going to get out through the door.

That left the window. All the bedroom windows were fastened with a steel rod that allowed them to open ten inches but no more. Alex picked up his CD player, put in the Beethoven CD, and turned it on. The CD spun around—moving at a fantastic speed—then slowly edged forward, still spinning, until it protruded out of the casing. Alex pressed the edge of the CD

against the steel rod. It took just a few seconds. The CD cut through the steel like scissors through paper. The rod fell away, allowing the window to swing fully open.

It was still snowing. Alex turned the CD player off and threw it back on his bed. Then he put on some sweats and his coat and climbed out the window. He was two floors up. Normally a fall from that height would have broken an ankle or a leg. But it had been snowing for the better part of ten hours, and a white bank had built up against the wall right beneath him. Alex lowered himself as far as he could, then let go. He fell through the air and hit the snow, disappearing as far as his waist. He felt his feet strike the hard undersoil, but the bank had protected him. He was cold and damp before he had even started. But he was unhurt.

He climbed out of the snow and began to move around the side of the building, making for the front. He would just have to hope that the main entrance wasn't locked too. But somehow he was sure it wouldn't be. His door had been locked automatically. Presumably a switch had been thrown and all the others had been locked too. Most of the boys would be asleep. Even the ones who were awake wouldn't be going anywhere, leaving Dr. Grief free to do whatever he wanted, coming and going as he pleased.

Alex had just made it to the side of the building when he heard the guards approach, boots crunching. There was nowhere to hide, so he threw himself facedown onto the snow, hugging the shadows. There were two guards. He could hear them talking softly in German, but he didn't dare look up. If he made any movement, they would see him. If they came too close, they would probably see him anyway. He held his breath, his heart pounding.

The guards walked past and rounded the corner. Their path would take them under his room. Would they see the open window? Alex had left the light off. With luck, there would be no reason for them to look up. But he was still aware that he might not have much time. He had to move now.

He lifted himself up and ran forward. His clothes were covered in snow, and more flakes were falling, drifting into his eyes. It was the coldest part of the night, and Alex was shivering by the time he reached the main door. What would he do if it was locked after all? He certainly wouldn't be able to stay out in the open until morning.

But the door was unlocked. Alex pushed it open and slipped into the warmth and darkness of the main hall. The dragon fireplace was in front of him. There had been a fire earlier in the evening, and the burned-out logs were still smoldering in the hearth. Alex held his hands against the glow, trying to draw a little warmth into himself. Everything was silent. The empty corridors stretched into the distance, illuminated by a few low-watt bulbs that had been left on at intervals. Only now did it occur to Alex that he could have been mistaken from the start.

Perhaps the doors were locked every night as part of the security. Perhaps he had jumped too quickly to the wrong conclusion and there was nothing going on at all.

,No!

It was a boy's voice—a long, quavering shout that echoed through the school. A moment later, Alex heard feet stamping along a wooden corridor somewhere above. He looked for somewhere to hide and found it inside the fireplace, right next to the logs. The actual fire was contained in a metal basket, and there was a wide space on each side between the basket and the brickwork. Alex crouched low, feeling the heat on the side of his face and legs. He looked out, past the two dragons, waiting to see what would happen.

Three people were coming down the stairs. Mrs. Stellenbosch was the first. She was followed by two of the guards, dragging something between them. It was a boy! He was facedown, dressed only in his pajamas, his bare feet sliding down the stone steps.

Mrs. Stellenbosch opened the library door and went in. The two guards followed. The door crashed shut. The silence returned.

It had all happened very quickly. Alex had been unable to see the boy's face. But he was sure he knew who it was. He had known just from the sound of his voice.

James Sprintz.

Alex eased himself out of the fireplace and crossed the hall, making for the library door.

There was no sound coming from the other side. He knelt down and looked through the keyhole. No lights were on inside the room. He could see nothing. What should he do? If he went back upstairs, he could make it back to his room without being seen. He could wait until the doors were unlocked and then slip into bed. Nobody would know he had been out.

But the only person in the school who had shown him any kindness was on the other side of the library door. He had been dragged down here. Perhaps he was being brainwashed ...

beaten, even. Alex couldn't just turn around and leave him.

Alex had made his decision. He threw open the door and walked in.

The library was empty.

He stood in the doorway, blinking. The library had only one door. All the windows were closed. There were no lights on and no sign that anyone had been there. The suit of armor stood in its alcove at the end, watching him as he moved forward. Could he have been mistaken?

Could Mrs. Stellenbosch and the guards have gone into a different room?

Alex went over to the alcove and looked behind the armor, wondering if there might be a second exit concealed there. There was nothing. He tapped a knuckle against the wall.

Curiously, it seemed to be made of metal, but unlike the wall across the stairs, there was no handle, nothing to suggest a way through.

There was nothing more he could do here. Alex decided to go back to his room before he was discovered.

But he had just made it to the second floor when he heard voices once again ... more guards, walking slowly down the corridor. Alex saw an empty door and slipped inside, once again ducking out of sight. He was in the laundry room. There was a washing machine, a dryer, and two ironing boards. At

least it was warm in here. He felt himself surrounded by the smell of soap.

The guards walked past, and soon the sound of their footsteps disappeared. There was a second metallic click that seemed to stretch the full length of the corridor, and Alex realized that all the doors had been unlocked at the same time. He could go back to bed. He crept out and hurried forward. His footsteps took him past James Sprintz's room, next to his own. He noticed that James's door was open. And then a voice called out from inside.

„Alex?“ It was James.

No. That wasn't possible. But there was someone in his room.

Alex looked inside. The light went on.

It *was* James. He was sitting up in bed, bleary-eyed, as if he had just woken up. Alex stared at him. He was wearing the same pajamas as the boy he had just seen dragged into the library

... but that couldn't have been him. It must have been someone else.

„What are you doing?“ James asked.

„I thought I heard something,“ Alex said.

„But you're dressed. And you're soaking wet!“ James looked at his watch. „It's almost three.“

Alex was surprised that so much time had passed. It had been only a quarter past two when he had woken up. „Are you all right?“ he asked.

„Yeah...“

„You haven't ...?“

„What?“

„Nothing. I'll see you tomorrow.“

Alex crept back to his own room. He closed the door then stripped off his wet clothes, dried himself with a towel, and got back into bed. If it hadn't been James he had seen being taken into the library, who was it? And yet it *had* been James; he was sure of it. He had heard the shout, seen the limp form on the stairs. So why was James lying now?

Alex closed his eyes and tried to get back to sleep. The movements of the night had created more puzzles and had solved nothing. But at least he'd gotten something out of it all.

He now knew how to get up to the third floor.

SEEING DOUBLE

JAMES WAS ALREADY EATING his breakfast when Alex came down: eggs, bacon, toast, and tea. He had the same breakfast every day. He raised a hand in greeting as Alex came in. But the moment he saw him, Alex got the feeling that something was wrong. James was smiling, but he seemed somehow distant, as if his thoughts were on other things.

„So what was all that about last night?“ James asked.

„I don't know.“ Alex was tempted to tell James everything—even the fact that he was here under a false name and that he had been sent to spy on the school. But he couldn't do it. Not here, so close to the other boys. „I think I had some sort of bad dream.“

„Did you go sleepwalking in the snow?“

„No. I thought I saw something, but I couldn't have. I just had a weird night.“ He changed the subject, lowering his voice. „Have you thought any more about your plan?“ he asked.

„What plan?“

„skiing.“

„We're not allowed to ski.“

„I mean ... escaping.“

James smiled as if he'd only just remembered what Alex was talking about. „Oh—I've changed my mind,“ he said.

„What do you mean?“

„If I ran away, my dad would only send me back again. There's no point. I might as well grin and bear it. Anyway, I'd never get all the way down the mountain. The snow's too thin.“

Alex stared at James. Everything he was saying was the exact opposite of what he had said the day before. He almost wondered if this was the same boy. But of course it was. He was as untidy as ever. The bruises—fading now—were still there on his face. Dark hair, dark blue eyes, pale skin—it was James. And yet, something had happened. He was sure of it.

Then James twisted around, and Alex saw that Mrs. Stellenbosch had come into the room, wearing a particularly nasty lime green dress that came down just to her knees. „Good morning, boys!“ she announced. „We're starting today's lessons in ten minutes. The first lesson is history in the tower room.“ She walked over to Alex's table. „James, I hope you're going to join us today.“

James shrugged. „All right, Mrs. Stellenbosch.“

„Excellent. We're looking at the life of Adolf Hitter. Such an interesting man. I'm sure you'll find it most valuable.“ She walked away.

Alex turned to James. „You're going to class?“

„Why not?“ James had finished eating. „I'm stuck here and there isn't much else to do.“

„Maybe I should have gone to class before. You shouldn't be so negative, Alex.“ He waved a finger to

underline what he was saying. ,You're wasting your time.'

Alex froze. He had seen that movement before, the way he had waved his finger. Joe Canterbury, the American boy, had done exactly the same thing yesterday.

Puppets dancing on the same string.

What had happened last night?

Alex watched James leave with the others. He felt he had lost his only friend at Point Blanc, and suddenly he wanted to be away from this place, off the mountain and back in the safe world of Brookland Comprehensive. There might have been a time when he had wanted this adventure. Now he just wanted out of it. Press Fast Forward three times on his CD player and MI6 would come for him. But he couldn't do that until he had something to report.

Alex knew what he had to do. He got up and left the room.

He had seen the way the night before when he was hiding in the fireplace. The chimney bent and twisted its way to the open air. He had been able to see a chink of light from the bottom. Moonlight. The bricks outside the academy might be too smooth to climb, but inside the chimney they were broken and uneven with plenty of hand- and footholds. Maybe there would be a fireplace on the third or fourth floors. But even if there weren't, the chimney would still lead him to the roof and—assuming there weren't any guards waiting for him there—he might be able to find a way down.

Alex reached the fireplace with the two stone dragons. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock.

Classes would continue until lunch, and nobody would wonder where he was. The fire had finally gone out, although the ashes were still warm. Would one of the guards come to clean it?

He would just have to hope that they would leave it until the afternoon. He looked up the chimney. He could see a narrow slit of bright blue. The sky seemed a very long way away, and the chimney was narrower than he had thought. What if he got stuck? He forced the thought out of his head, reached for a crack in the brickwork, and pulled himself up.

The inside of the chimney smelled of a thousand fires. Soot hung in the air, and Alex couldn't breathe without taking it in. He managed to find a foothold and pushed, sliding himself a short way up. Now he was wedged inside, forced into a sitting position with his feet against one wall, his back against the other, and his legs and bottom hanging in the air. He wouldn't need to use his hands at all. He only had to straighten his legs to push himself up, using the pressure of his feet against the wall to keep himself in place. Push and slide. He had to be careful. Every movement brought more soot trickling down. He could feel it in his hair. He didn't dare look up. If it went into his eyes he would be blinded. Push and slide again, then again. Not too fast. If his feet slipped he would fall all the way back down. He was already a long way above the fireplace. How far had he gone? At least one floor ... meaning that he had to be on his way to the third. If he fell from this height, he would break both his legs.

The chimney was getting darker and tighter. The light at the top didn't seem to be getting any nearer. Alex found it difficult to maneuver himself. He could barely breathe. His entire mouth seemed to be coated in soot. He pushed again, and this time his knees banged into brickwork, sending a spasm of pain down to his feet. Pinning himself in place, Alex reached up and tried to feel where he was going. There was an L-shaped wall jutting out above his head.

His knees had hit the bottom part of it. But his head was behind the upright section. Whatever the obstruction was, it effectively cut the passageway in half, leaving only the narrowest of gaps for Alex's shoulders and body to pass through.

Once again, the nightmare prospect of getting stuck flashed into his mind. Nobody would ever find him. He would suffocate in the dark. He gasped for breath and swallowed soot. One last try! He pushed again, his arms stretching out over his head. He felt his back slide up the wall, the rough brickwork tearing at his shirt. Then his hands hooked over what he realized must be the top of the L. He pulled himself up and found himself looking into a second fireplace, sharing the main chimney. That was the obstruction he had just climbed around. Alex raised himself over the top and dived clumsily forward. More logs and ashes broke his fall. He had made it to the third floor!

He crawled out of the fireplace. Only a few weeks before, at Brookland, he'd been reading about Victorian chimney sweeps, how boys as young as nine had been forced into virtual slave labor. He had never thought he would learn how they felt. He coughed and spat into the palm of his hand. His saliva was black. He wondered what he must look like. He would have to have a bath before he was seen.

He stood up. The third floor was as silent as the first and second. Soot trickled out of his hair, and for a moment he was blinded. He propped himself against a statue while he wiped his eyes. Then he looked again. He was leaning on a stone dragon, identical to the one on the ground floor. He looked at the fireplace. That too was identical. In fact ...

Alex wondered if he hadn't somehow made a terrible mistake. He was standing in a hall that was the same in every detail as the hall on the ground floor. There were the same corridors, the same staircase, the same fireplace ... even the same animal heads staring miserably from the walls. It was as if he had climbed in a circle, arriving back *where he* had begun. He turned around. No. Here was one difference. There was no main door. He could look down on the front courtyard from the window. There was a guard leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette. This was the third floor. But it had been constructed as a perfect replica of the first.

Alex tiptoed forward, worried that somebody might have heard him climb out of the fireplace. But there was no one around. He followed the corridor as far as the first door. On the first floor, this would lead into the library. Gently, an inch at a time, he opened the door. It led into a second library—again, the spitting image of the first. It had the same tables and chairs, the same suit of armor guarding the same alcove. He ran an eye along one of the shelves. It even had the same books.

But there was one difference—at least, one difference that Alex could see. He felt as if he had strayed into one of those puzzles they sometimes printed in comics or magazines: two identical pictures, but ten deliberate mistakes. Can you spot them? The mistake here was that there was a large television set built into a shelf on a wall. The television was on. Alex found himself looking at an image of yet another library. He was beginning to feel dizzy. What was the library on the television screen? It couldn't be this one because Alex himself was not being shown. So it had to be the library on the first floor.

Two identical libraries. You could sit in one and watch the other. But why? What was the point?

It took Alex about ten minutes to discover that the entire third floor was a carbon copy of the first floor with the same dining room, living rooms, and games room. Alex went over to the snooker table

and placed a ball in the middle. It tolled into the corner pocket. The room was on the same slant. A television screen showed the games room downstairs. It was the same as in the library: one room spying on another.

He retraced his steps and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. He wanted to find his own room, but first he went into James's. It was another perfect copy: the same sci-fi posters, the same mobile hanging over the bed, the same lava lamp on the same table. There were even the same clothes strewn over the floor. So these rooms weren't just built to be the same—they were carefully maintained. Whatever happened downstairs, happened upstairs. But did that mean there had been somebody living here, watching every movement that James Sprintz made, doing everything he did? And if so, had somebody else been doing the same for him?

Alex went next door. It was like stepping into his own room. Again there was the same bed, the same furnishings, the same television. He turned it on. The picture showed his room on the first floor. There was the CD player, lying on the bed. There were his wet clothes from the night before. Had somebody been watching when he cut through the window and climbed out into the night? Alex felt a jolt of alarm, then forced himself to relax. This room—the copy of his room—was different. Nobody had moved in here yet. He could tell, just by looking around him.

The bed hadn't been slept in. And the smaller details hadn't yet been copied. There was no CD player in the duplicate room. No wet clothes. He had left the closet door open downstairs. In here it was closed.

The whole thing was like some sort of mind-bending puzzle. Alex forced himself to think it through. Every single boy who arrived at the academy was watched. All his actions were duplicated. If he hung a poster on the wall of his room, an identical poster was hung in an identical room. There would be someone living in this room, doing everything that Alex did.

He remembered the figure he had glimpsed the day before ... someone wearing what looked like a white mask. Perhaps that person had been about to move in. But all the evidence suggested that, for whatever reason, he wasn't here yet.

And that still left the biggest question of all. What was the point? To spy on the boys was one thing. But to copy everything they did?

A door swung shut and he heard voices, two men walking down the corridor outside. Alex crept over to the door and looked out. He just had time to see Dr. Grief walk through a door with another man, a short, plump figure in a white coat. They had gone into the laundry room.

Alex slipped out of the duplicate bedroom and followed them.

,...you have completed the work. I am grateful to you, Mr. Baxter.'

,Thank you, Dr. Grief.'

They had left the door open. Alex crouched down and looked through. Here at last was a section of the third floor that didn't mirror the first. There were no washing machines or ironing boards here. Instead, Alex found himself looking into a room with a row of sinks and a second set of doors leading into a fully equipped operating room at least twice as big as the laundry room on the first floor. At the center of the room was an operating table. The walls were lined with shelves containing surgical equipment, chemicals, and—scattered across the surface—

what looked like black-and-white photographs.

An operating room! What was its role in this bizarre, devilish jigsaw puzzle? The two men had walked into it and were talking together, Grief standing with one hand in his pocket. Alex chose his moment, then slipped into the outer room, crouching down beside one of the sinks.

The second set of doors was open. From here he could watch and listen as the two of them talked.

„So ... I hope you're pleased with the last operation.“ It was Mr. Baxter speaking. He had half turned toward the doors, and Alex could see a round, flabby face with yellow hair and a thin mustache. Baxter was wearing a bow tie and a checked suit underneath his white coat. Alex had never seen the man before. He was certain of it. And yet, he sensed he knew him. Another puzzle!

„Entirely,“ Dr. Grief replied. „I saw him as soon as the bandages came off. You have done extremely well.“

„I was always the best. But that's what you paid for.“ Baxter chuckled. His voice was oily.

„And while we're on that subject, maybe we should talk about my final payment.“

„You have already been paid the sum of one million dollars.“

„Yes, Dr. Grief.“ Baxter smiled. „But I was wondering if you might not like to think about a little ... bonus?“

„I thought we had an agreement.“ Dr. Grief turned his head very slowly. The red glasses homed in on the other man like searchlights.

„We had an agreement for my work, yes. But my silence is another matter. I was thinking of another quarter of a million. Given the size and the scope of your Gemini Project, it's not so much to ask. Then I'll retire to my little house in Spain and you'll never hear from me again.“

„I will never hear from you again?“

„I promise.“

Dr. Grief nodded. „Yes. I think that's a good idea.“

His hand came out of his pocket. Alex saw that it was holding an automatic pistol with a thick silencer protruding from the barrel. Baxter was still smiling as Grief shot him once, through the middle of the forehead. He was thrown off his feet and onto the operating table. He lay still.

Dr. Grief lowered the gun. He went over to a telephone, picked it up, and dialed a number.

There was a pause while his call was answered. Then ...

„This is Grief. I have some garbage in the operating room that needs to be removed. Could you please inform the disposal team?“

He put down the phone and, glancing one last time at the still figure on the operating table, walked to the other side of the room. Alex saw him press a button. A section of the wall slid open to reveal an elevator on the other side. Dr. Grief got in. The doors closed.

Alex straightened up, too shocked to think straight. He staggered forward and went into the operating room. He knew he had to move fast. The disposal team that Dr. Grief had called for would be on their way. But he wanted to know what sort of operations took place here.

Mr. Baxter had presumably been the surgeon. But for what sort of work had he been paid a million dollars?

Trying not to look at the body, Alex glanced around. On one shelf was a collection of surgical knives, as horrible as anything he had ever seen, the blades so sharp that he could almost feel their touch just by looking at them. There were rolls of gauze, syringes, and bottles containing various liquids. But nothing to say how Baxter had been employed. Alex realized it was hopeless. He knew nothing about medicine. This room could have been used for anything from ingrown toenails to full-blown heart surgery.

And then he saw the photographs. He recognized himself, lying on a bed that he thought he knew too. It was Paris! Room 13 at the Hotel du Monde. He remembered the black-and-white comforter, as well as the clothes he had been wearing that night. The clothes had been removed in most of the photographs. Every inch of him had been photographed, sometimes close up, sometimes wider. In every picture, his eyes were closed. Looking at himself, Alex knew that he had been drugged and, for the first time, remembered how the dinner with Mrs. Stellenbosch had ended.

The photographs disgusted him. He had been manipulated by people who thought he was worth nothing at all. From the moment he had met them, he had disliked Dr. Grief and his assistant director. Now he felt pure loathing. He still didn't know what they were doing. But they were evil. They had to be stopped.

He was shaken out of his thoughts by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. The disposal team! He looked around him and cursed. He didn't have time to get out, and there was nowhere in the room to hide. Then he remembered the elevator. He went over to it and urgently stabbed at the button. The footsteps were getting nearer. He heard voices. Then the panels slid open. Alex stepped into a small, silver box. There were five buttons: S, R, 1, 2, and 3. He pressed R. He knew enough French to know that the R must stand for *Rez-de-chaussee* ... or first floor.

With luck, the elevator would take him back to where he had begun.

The doors slid shut a few seconds before the guards entered the operating room. Alex felt his stomach lurch as he was carried down. The elevator slowed. He realized that the doors could open anywhere. He might find himself surrounded by guards—or by the other boys in the school. Well it was too late now. He had made his choice without thinking. He would just have to cope with whatever he found.

But he was lucky. The doors slid open to reveal the library. Alex assumed this was the real library and not another copy. The room was empty. He stepped out of the elevator, then turned around. He was facing the alcove. The elevator doors formed the alcove wall. They were brilliantly camouflaged, with the suit of armor now sliced exactly in two, one half on each side.

As the doors closed automatically, the armor slid back together again, completing the disguise.

Despite himself, Alex had to admire the simplicity of it. The entire building was a fantastic box of tricks.

Alex looked at his hands. They were still filthy. He had almost forgotten that he was completely covered in soot. He crept out of the library, trying not to leave black footprints on the carpet. Then he hurried back to his room. When he got there, he had to remind himself that it was indeed his room and not the copy two floors above. But the CD player was there, and that was what he most needed.

He knew enough. It was time to call for the cavalry. He pressed the Fast Forward button three times, then went to take a shower.

DELAYING TACTICS

IT WAS RAINING IN LONDON, the sort of rain that seems never to stop. The early evening traffic was huddled together, going nowhere. Alan Blunt was standing at the window, looking out over the street, when there was a knock at the door. He turned away almost reluctantly, as if the city at its most damp and dismal held some attraction for him. Mrs. Jones came in. She was carrying a sheet of paper. As Blunt sat down behind his desk, he noticed the two words MOST

URGENT printed in red across the top.

,We've heard from Alex,' Mrs. Jones said.

,Oh, yes?'

,Smithers gave him a Euro-satellite transmitter built into a portable CD player. Alex sent a signal to us this morning, at eleven twenty-seven hours, his time.'

,Meaning ...?'

,Either he's in trouble or he's found out enough for us to go in. Either way, we have to pull him out.'

,I wonder... ' Blunt leaned back in his chair, deep in thought. As a young man, he had gained a degree with honors in mathematics at Cambridge University. Thirty years later, he still saw life as only a series of complicated calculations. ,Alex has been at Point Blanc for how long?' he asked.

,A week.'

,As I recall, he didn't want to go. According to Sir David Friend, his behavior at Haverstock Hall was, to say the least, antisocial. Did you know that he knocked out Friend's daughter with a stun dart? Apparently, he also got her nearly killed in an incident in a railway tunnel.'

Mrs. Jones sat down. ,What are you saying, Alan?' she demanded.

,Only that Alex may not be one hundred percent reliable.'

,He sent the message.' Mrs. Jones couldn't keep the exasperation out of her voice. ,For all we know, he could be in serious trouble. We gave him the device as an alarm signal, to let us know if he needed help. He's used it. We can't just sit back and do nothing.'

,I wasn't suggesting that.' Alan Blunt looked curiously at his head of operations. ,You're not forming some sort of attachment to Alex Rider, are you?' he asked.

Mrs. Jones looked away. ,Don't be ridiculous.'

,You seem worried about him.'

,He's fourteen years old, Alan! He's a child, for heaven's sake!'

,You used to have children.'

,Yes.' Mrs. Jones turned to face him again. ,Perhaps that does make a difference. But even you must admit that he's special. We don't have another agent like him. A fourteen-year-old boy! The perfect secret weapon. My feelings about him have nothing to do with it. We can't afford to lose him.'

‘I just don’t want to go blundering into Point Blanc without any firm information,’ Blunt said. ‘First of all, this is France we’re talking about—and you know what the French are like. If we’re seen to be invading their territory, they’ll kick up one hell of a fuss. Secondly, Grief has got hold of boys from some of the wealthiest families in the world. If we go storming in with the SAS or whatever, the whole thing could blow up into a major international incident.’

‘You wanted proof that the school was connected with the deaths of Roscoe and Ivanov,’ Mrs. Jones said. ‘Alex may have it.’

‘He may have it and he may not. A twenty-four-hour delay shouldn’t make a great deal of difference.’

‘Twenty-four hours?’

‘We’ll put a unit on standby. They can keep an eye on things. If Alex is in trouble, we’ll find out soon enough. It could play to our favor if he’s managed to stir things up. It’s exactly what we want. Force Grief to show his hand.’

‘And if Alex contacts us again?’

‘Then we’ll go in.’

‘We may be too late.’

‘For Alex?’ Blunt showed no emotion. ‘I’m sure you don’t need to worry about him, Mrs. Jones. He can look after himself.’

The telephone rang, and Blunt answered it. The discussion was over. Mrs. Jones got up and left to make the arrangements for an SAS unit to fly into Geneva. Blunt was right, of course.

Delaying tactics might work in their favor.

Clear it with the French. Find out what was going on. And it was only twenty-four hours.

She would just have to hope Alex could survive that long.

Alex found himself eating his breakfast on his own. For the first time, James Sprintz had decided to join the other boys. There they were, the six of them, suddenly the best of friends.

Alex looked carefully at the boy who had once been his friend, trying to see what it was that had changed about him. He knew the answer. It was everything and nothing. James was exactly the same and completely different at the same time.

He finished his food and got up. James called out to him. ‘Why don’t you come to class this afternoon, Alex? It’s Latin.’

Alex shook his head. ‘Latin’s a waste of time.’

‘Is that what you think?’ James couldn’t keep the sneer out of his voice, and for a moment Alex was startled. For just one second it hadn’t been James talking at all. It had been James who had moved his mouth, but it had been Dr. Grief speaking the words.

‘You enjoy it,’ Alex said. He hurried out of the room.

More than twenty hours had passed since he had pressed the Fast Forward button on the Discman. Alex wasn’t sure what he had been expecting. A fleet of helicopters all flying the Union Jack would

have been reassuring. But so far nothing had happened. He even wondered if the alarm signal had worked. At the same time, he was annoyed with himself.

He had seen Grief shoot the man called Baxter in the operating room, and he had panicked.

He knew that Grief was a killer. He knew that the academy was far more than the finishing school it pretended to be. But he still didn't have all the answers. What exactly was Dr. Grief doing? Had he been responsible for the deaths of Michael J. Roscoe and Viktor Ivanov—and if so, why?

The fact was, he didn't know enough. And by the time MI6 arrived, Dr. Baxter's body would be buried somewhere in the mountains and there would be nothing to suggest there was anything wrong. Alex would look like a fool. He could almost imagine Dr. Grief telling his side of the story ...

, Yes. There is an operating room here. It was built years ago. We never use the top two floors. There is an elevator, yes. It was built before we came. We explained to Alex about the armed guards. They're here for his protection. But as you can see, gentlemen, there is nothing unpleasant happening here. The other boys are fine. Baxter? No, I don't know anyone by that name. Obviously Alex has been having bad dreams. I'm amazed that he was sent here to spy on us. I would ask you to take him with you when you leave...'

He had to find out more—and that meant going back up to the third floor. Or perhaps down. Alex remembered the letters in the elevator. *R* for *Rez-de-chaussee*. *S* had to stand for *Sous-sol*— French for basement.

He went over to the Latin classroom and looked in through the half-open door. Dr. Grief was out of sight, but Alex could hear his voice.

, *Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas*—'

There was the sound of scratching, chalk on a blackboard. And there were the six boys, sitting at their desks, listening intently. James was sitting between Hugo and Tom, taking notes.

Alex looked at his watch. They would be there another hour. He was on his own.

He walked back down the corridor and slipped into the library. He had woken up still smelling faintly of soot and had no intention of making his way back up the chimney. Instead he crossed over to the suit of armor. He knew now that the alcove disguised a pair of elevator doors. They could be opened from inside. Presumably there was some sort of control on the outside too.

It took him just a few minutes to find it. There were three buttons built into the breastplate of the armor. Even up close, the buttons looked like part of the suit ... something the medieval knight would have had to use to strap the thing on. But when Alex pressed the middle button, it moved. A moment later, the armor split in half again and he found himself looking into the waiting elevator.

This time he went down, not up. The elevator seemed to travel a long way, as if the basement of the building had been built far underground. Finally, the doors slid open again.

Alex looked out onto a curving passageway with tiled walls that reminded him a little of a London subway station. The air was cold down here. The passage was lit by naked bulbs, screwed into the ceiling at intervals.

He looked out, then ducked back. A guard sat at a table at the end of the corridor, reading a newspaper. Would he have heard the elevator doors open? Alex leaned forward again. The guard

was absorbed in the sports pages. He hadn't moved. Alex slipped out and crept down the passage, moving away from him. He reached the corner and turned into a second passageway lined with steel doors. There was nobody else in sight.

Where was he? There had to be something down here or there wouldn't be any need for a guard. Alex went over to the nearest door. There was a peephole set in the front, and he looked through into a bare, white cell with two bunk beds, a toilet, and a sink. There were two boys in the cell. One he had never seen before, but he recognized the other. It was the red-haired boy, Tom McMorin. But he had seen Tom in Latin class just a few minutes ago! What was he doing here?

Alex moved on to the next cell. This one also held two boys. One was a fair-haired, fit-looking boy with blue eyes and freckles. Once again, he recognized the other. It was James Sprintz. Alex examined the door. There were two bolts, but as far as he could see, no key. He drew back the bolts and jerked the door handle down. The door opened. He went in.

James stood up, astonished to see him. 'Alex! What are you doing here?'

Alex closed the door. 'We haven't got much time,' he said. He was speaking in a whisper even though there was little chance of being overheard. 'What happened to you?'

'They came for me the night before last,' James said. 'They dragged me out of bed and into the library. There was some sort of elevator...'

'Behind the armor.'

'Yes. I didn't know what they were doing. I thought they were going to kill me. But then they threw me in here.'

'You've been here for two days?'

'Yes.'

Alex shook his head. 'I saw you having breakfast upstairs fifteen minutes ago.'

'They've made duplicates of us.' The other boy had spoken for the first time. He had an American accent. 'All of us! I don't know how they've done it or why. But that's what they've done.' He glanced at the door with anger in his eyes. 'I've been here for months. My name's Paul Roscoe.'

'Roscoe! Your dad's ...?'

'Michael Roscoe.'

Alex fell silent. He couldn't tell this boy what had happened to his father and he looked away, afraid that Paul would read it in his eyes.

'How did you get down here?' James asked.

'Listen,' Alex said. He was speaking rapidly now. 'I was sent here by MI6. My name isn't Alex Friend. It's Alex Rider. Everything's going to be okay. They'll send people in and get you all freed.'

'You're a spy?' James was obviously startled.

Alex nodded. 'I'm sort of a spy, I suppose,' he said.

'You've opened the door. We can get out of here!' Paul Roscoe stood up, ready to move.

„No!“ Alex held up his hands. „You’ve got to wait. There’s no way down the mountain.

Stay here for now and I’ll come back with help. I promise you. It’s the only way.“

„I can’t—“

„You have to. Trust me, Paul. I’m going to have to lock you back in so that nobody will know I’ve been here. But it won’t be for long. I’ll come back!“

Alex couldn’t wait for any more argument. He went back to the door and opened it.

Mrs. Stellenbosch was standing outside.

He barely had time to register the shock of seeing her. He tried to bring up a hand to protect himself, to twist his body into position for a karate kick. But it was already too late. Her arm shot out, the heel of her hand driving into his face. It was like being hit by a brick wall. Alex felt every bone in his body rattle. White light exploded behind his eyes. Then he was out.

HOW TO RULE THE WORLD

,OPEN YOUR EYES ALEX. Dr. Grief wishes to speak to you.'

The words came from across an ocean. Alex groaned and tried to lift his head. He was sitting down, his arms pinned behind his back. The whole side of his face felt bruised and swollen, and the taste of blood was in his mouth. He opened his eyes and waited for the room to come into focus. Mrs. Stellenbosch was standing in front of him, her fist curled loosely in her other hand. Alex remembered the force of the blow that had knocked him out. His whole head was throbbing, and he ran his tongue over his teeth to see if any were missing. It was fortunate he had rolled with the punch. Otherwise she might have broken his neck.

Dr. Grief was sitting in his golden chair, watching Alex with what might have been curiosity or distaste or perhaps a little of both. There was nobody else in the room. It was still snowing outside, and a small fire burned in the hearth. The flames weren't as red as Dr. Grief's eyes.

,You have put us to a great deal of inconvenience,' he said.

Alex straightened his head. He tried to move his hands, but they had been chained together behind the chair.

,Your name is not Alex Friend. You are not the son of Sir David Friend. Your name is Alex Rider, and you are employed by the British secret service.' Dr. Grief was simply stating facts.

There was no emotion in his voice.

,We have microphones concealed in the cells,' Mrs. Stellenbosch explained. ,Sometimes it is useful for us to hear the conversations between our young guests. Everything you said was overheard by the guard who summoned me.'

,You have wasted our time and our money,' Dr. Grief continued. ,For that you will be punished. It is not a punishment you will survive.'

The words were cold and absolute, and Alex felt the fear that they triggered. It coursed through his bloodstream, closing in on his heart. He took a deep breath, forcing himself back under control. He had signaled MI6. They would be on their way to Point Blanc. They might appear any minute now. He just had to play for time.

,You can't do anything to me,' he said.

Mrs. Stellenbosch lashed out, and he was almost thrown backward as the back of her hand sliced into the side of his head. Only the chair kept him upright. ,When you speak to the director, you will refer to him as 'Dr. Grief,' ' she said.

Alex looked around again, his eyes watering. ,You can't do anything to me, Dr. Grief,' he said. ,I know everything. I know about Project Gemini. And I've already told London what I know. If you do anything to me, they'll kill you. They're on their way here now.'

Dr. Grief smiled, and in that single moment Alex knew that nothing he said would change what was about to happen to him. The man was too confident. He was like a poker player who had not only managed to see all the cards but had also stolen the four aces for himself.

‘It may well be that your friends are on their way,’ he said. ‘But I do not think you have told them anything. We have been through your luggage and found the transmitting device concealed in the Discman. I note also that it is an ingenious electric saw. But as for the transmitter, it can send out a signal but not a message. How you learned about the Gemini Project is of no interest to me. I assume you overheard the name while eavesdropping at a door.’

We should have been more careful—but for British intelligence to send in a child ... that was something we could not expect.

‘Let us assume that your friends do come calling. They will find nothing wrong. You yourself will have disappeared. I shall tell them that you ran away. I will say that my men are looking for you even now, but that I very much fear you have died a cold and lingering death on the mountainside. Nobody will guess what I have done here. The Gemini Project will succeed. It has already succeeded. And even if your friends do take it upon themselves to kill me, it will make no difference. I cannot be killed, Alex. The world is already mine.’

‘You mean, it belongs to the kids you’ve hired to act as doubles,’ Alex said.

‘Hired?’ Dr. Grief muttered a few words to Mrs. Stellenbosch in a harsh, guttural language.

Alex assumed it must be Afrikaans. Her thick lips parted and she laughed, showing heavy, discolored teeth. ‘Is that what you think?’ Dr. Grief asked. ‘Is that what you believe?’

‘I’ve seen them...’

‘You don’t know what you’ve seen. You have no understanding of my genius! Your little mind couldn’t begin to encompass what I have achieved.’ Dr. Grief was breathing heavily. He seemed to come to a decision. ‘It is rare enough for me to come face-to-face with the enemy,’ he said. ‘It has always been my frustration that I will never be able to communicate to the world the brilliance of what I have done. Well, since I have you here—a captive audience, so to speak—I shall allow myself the luxury of describing the Gemini Project. And when you go, screaming, to your death, you will understand that there was never any hope for you. That you could not hope to come up against a man like me and win. Perhaps that will make it easier for you.’

‘I will smoke, if you don’t mind, Doctor,’ Mrs. Stellenbosch said. She took out her cigars and lit one. Smoke danced in front of her eyes.

‘I am, as I am sure you are aware, South African,’ Dr. Grief began. ‘The animals in the hall and in this room are all souvenirs of my time there, shot on safari. I still miss the country. It is the most beautiful place on this planet.’

‘What you may not know, however, is that for many years I was one of South Africa’s foremost biochemists. I was head of the biology department at the University of Johannesburg. I later ran the Cyclops Institute for Genetic Research in Pretoria. But the height of my career came in the 1960s when, although I was still in my twenties, John Vorster, the president of South Africa, appointed me minister of science.’

‘You’ve already said you’re going to kill me,’ Alex said, ‘but I didn’t think that meant you were going to bore me to death.’

Mrs. Stellenbosch coughed on her cigar and advanced on Alex, her fist clenched. But Dr.

Grief stopped her. 'Let the boy have his little joke,' he said. 'There will be pain enough for him later.'

The assistant director glowered at Alex, but returned to her seat. Dr. Grief went on. 'I am telling you this, Alex, only because it will help you understand. You perhaps know nothing about South Africa. English schoolchildren are, I have found, the laziest and most ignorant in the world. All that will soon change! But let me tell you a little bit about my country, as it was when I was young.

'The white people of South Africa ruled everything. Under the laws that came to be known to the world as apartheid, black people were not allowed to live near white people. They could not marry white people. They could not share whites' toilets, restaurants, sports arenas, or bars.

They had to carry passes. They were treated like animals.'

'It was horrible,' Alex said.

'It was wonderful!' Mrs. Stellenbosch murmured.

'It was indeed perfect,' Dr. Grief agreed. 'But as the years passed, I became aware that it would also be short-lived. The uprising at Soweto, the growing resistance, and the way the entire world—including your own stinking country—ganged up on us ... I knew that white South Africa was doomed, and I even foresaw the day when power would be handed over to a man like Nelson Mandela.'

'A criminal!' Mrs. Stellenbosch added. Smoke was dribbling out of her nostrils.

Alex said nothing. It was clear enough that both Dr. Grief and his assistant were mad. Just how mad they were was becoming clearer with every word they spoke.

'I looked at the world,' Dr. Grief said, 'and I began to see just how weak and pathetic it was becoming. How could it happen that a country like mine could be given away to people who had no idea how to run it? And why was the rest of the world so determined for it to be so? I looked around me and I saw that the people of America and Europe had become stupid and weak. The fall of the Berlin Wall only made things worse. I had always admired the Russians, but they quickly became infected with the same disease. And I thought to myself, If I ruled the world, how much stronger it would be. How much better...'

'For you, perhaps, Dr. Grief,' Alex said. 'But not for anyone else.'

Grief ignored him. His eyes, behind the red glasses, were brilliant. 'It has been the dream of very few men to rule the entire world,' he said. 'Hitler was one. Napoleon another. Stalin, perhaps, a third. Great men! Remarkable men! But to rule the world in the twenty-first century requires something more than military strength. The world is a more complicated place now.

Where does real power lie? Oh, yes—in politics. Prime ministers and presidents. But you will also find power in industry, in science, in the media, in oil, in the Internet... Modern life is a great tapestry, and if you wish to take control of it all, you must seize hold of every strand.

'This is what I decided to do, Alex. And it was because of my unique position in the unique place that was South Africa that I was able to attempt it.' Grief took a deep breath. 'What do you know about nuclear transplantation?' he asked.

'I don't know anything,' Alex said. 'But as you said, I'm an English schoolboy. Lazy and ignorant.'

‘There is another word for it. Have you heard of cloning?’

Alex almost burst out laughing. ‘You mean, like Dolly the sheep?’

‘To you it may be a joke, Alex. Something out of science fiction. But scientists have been searching for a way to create replicas of themselves for more than a hundred years. The word itself is Greek.’

‘The Greek word for twig,’ Mrs. Stellenbosch muttered.

‘Think how a twig starts as one branch but then splits into two,’ Grief continued. ‘This is exactly what has been achieved with lizards, with sea urchins, with tadpoles and frogs, with mice and—yes—on the fifth of July, 1996, with a sheep. The theory is simple enough. Nuclear transplantation: to take the nucleus out of an egg and to replace it with a cell taken from an adult. I won’t tire you with the details, Alex. But it is not a joke. Dolly was the perfect copy of a sheep that had died six years earlier. She was the result of no less than one hundred years of experimentation. And in all that time, the scientists shared a single dream: to clone an adult human. Well ... I have achieved that dream!’

He paused.

‘If you want a round of applause, you’ll have to take off the handcuffs,’ Alex said.

‘I don’t want applause,’ Grief snarled. ‘Not from you. What I want from you is your life, and that I will take.’

‘So who did you clone?’ Alex asked. ‘Not Mrs. Stellenbosch, I hope. I’d have thought one of her was more than enough.’

‘Who do you think? I cloned myself!’ Dr. Grief grabbed hold of the arms of his chair, a king on a throne of his own imagination. ‘Twenty years ago I began my work,’ he explained. ‘I told you—I was minister of science. I had all the equipment and money I needed. Also, this was South Africa! The rules that hampered other scientists around the world did not apply to me. I was able to use human beings—political prisoners—for my experiments. Everything was done in secret. I worked without stopping for twenty years. And then, when I was ready, I stole a very large amount of money from the South African government and moved here.

‘This was in 1981. And six years later, almost a whole decade before an English scientist astonished the world by cloning a sheep, I did something far, far more extraordinary ... here, at Point Blanc. I cloned myself. Not just once! Sixteen times. Sixteen exact copies of me. With my looks. My brains. My ambition. And my determination.’

‘Were they all as mad as you too?’ Alex asked, and he flinched as Mrs. Stellenbosch hit him again, this time in the stomach. But he wanted to make them angry. If they were angry, they might make mistakes.

‘To begin with, they were babies,’ Dr. Grief said. ‘Sixteen babies who would grow up to become replicas of myself. I have had to wait fourteen years for the babies to become boys and the boys to become teenagers. Eva here has been a mother to all of them. You have met them ...

some of them.’

‘Tom, Cassian, Nicolas, Hugo, Joe. And James...’ Now Alex understood why they had somehow all looked the same.

‘Do you see, Alex? Do you have any idea what I have done? I will never die because even when this body is finished with, I will live on in them. I am them and they are me. We are one and the same.’

He smiled again. ‘I was helped in all this by Eva, who had also worked with me in the South African government. She had worked in BOSS—our own secret service. She was one of their principal interrogators.’

‘Happy days!’ Mrs. Stellenbosch muttered.

‘Together we set up the academy. Because, you see, that was the second part of my plan. I had created sixteen copies of myself. But that wasn’t enough. You remember what I said about the strands of the tapestry? I had to bring them here, to draw them together.’

‘To replace them with copies of yourself!’ Suddenly Alex saw it all. It was totally insane.

But it was the only way to make sense of everything he had seen.

Dr. Grief nodded. ‘It was my observation that families with wealth and power frequently had children who were troubled. Parents with no time for their sons. Sons with no love for their parents. These children became my targets, Alex. Because, you see, I wanted what these children had.’

‘Take a boy like Hugo Vries. One day his father will leave him with a fifty percent stake in the world’s diamond market. Or Tom McMorin. His mother has newspapers all over the world.’

Or Joe Canterbury. His father at the Pentagon, his mother a senator. What better start for a life in politics? What better start for a future president of the United States, even? Fifteen of the most promising children who have been sent here to Point Blanc, I have replaced with copies of myself. Surgically altered, of course, to look exactly like the original thing.’

‘Baxter ... the man you shot ...’

‘You have been busy, Alex.’ For the first time, Dr. Grief looked surprised. ‘The late Mr. Baxter was a plastic surgeon. I found him working in Harley Street, in London. He had gambling debts. It was easy to bring him under my control, and it was his job to operate on my family, to change their faces, their skin color, and where necessary their bodies so that they would exactly resemble the teenagers they replaced. From the moment the real teenagers arrived here at Point Blanc, they were kept under observation.’

‘With identical rooms on the third and fourth floors.’

‘Yes. My doubles were able to watch their targets on television monitors. To copy their every movement. To learn their mannerisms. To eat like them. To speak like them. In short, to become them.’

‘It would never have worked!’ Alex twisted in his chair, trying to find some leverage in the handcuffs. But the metal was too tight. He couldn’t move. ‘Parents would know that the children you sent back were fakes!’ he insisted. ‘Any mother would know it wasn’t her son, even if he looked the same.’

Mrs. Stellenbosch giggled. She had finished her cigar. Now she lit another.

‘You’re quite wrong, Alex,’ Dr. Grief said. ‘In the first place, you are talking about busy, hardworking parents who had little or no time for their children in the first place. And you forget that

the very reason these people sent their sons here was because they *wanted* them to change. It is the reason all parents send their sons to private schools. Oh, yes, they think the schools will make their children better, more clever, more confident. They would actually be disappointed if those children came back the same.

,And nature, too, is on our side. A boy of fourteen leaves home for six or seven months. By the time he gets back, nature will have made its mark. The boy will be taller. He will be fatter or thinner. Even his voice will have changed. It's all part of puberty, and the parents when they see him will say, 'Oh, Tom, you've gotten so big, and you're so grown-up!' And they will suspect nothing. In fact, they would be worried if the boy *hadn't* changed.'

,But Roscoe guessed, didn't he?' Alex knew that he had arrived at the truth, the reason he had been sent here in the first place. He knew why Roscoe and Ivanov had died.

,There have been two occasions when the parents did not believe what they saw,' Dr. Grief admitted. ,Michael J. Roscoe in New York. And General Major Viktor Ivanov in Moscow.

Neither man completely guessed what had happened. But they were unhappy. They argued with their sons. They asked too many questions.'

,And the sons told you what had happened.'

,You might say that I told myself. The sons, after all, are me. But yes. Michael Roscoe knew something was wrong and called MI6 in London. I presume that is how you were unlucky enough to be involved. I had to pay to have Roscoe killed just as I paid for the death of Ivanov.

But it was to be expected that there would be problems. Two out of sixteen is not so catastrophic, and of course it makes no difference to my plans. In many ways, it even helps me.

Michael J. Roscoe left his entire fortune to his son. And I understand that the Russian president is taking a personal interest in Dimitry Ivanov, following the loss of his father.

,In short, the Gemini Project has been an outstanding success. In a few days' time, the last of the children will leave Point Blanc to take their places in the heart of their family. Once I am satisfied that they have all been accepted, I will, I fear, have to dispose of the originals. They will die painlessly.

,The same cannot be said for you, Alex Rider. You have caused me a great deal of annoyance. I propose, therefore, to make an example of you.' Dr Grief reached into his pocket and took out a device that looked like a pager. It contained a single button, which he pressed.

,What is the first lesson tomorrow morning, Eva?' he asked.

,Biology,' Mrs. Stellenbosch replied.

,As I thought. You have perhaps been to biology classes where a frog or a rat has been dissected, Alex?' he asked. ,For some time now, my children have been asking to see a human dissection. This is no surprise to me. I myself first attended a human dissection at the age of fourteen. Tomorrow morning, at half past nine, their wish will be granted. You will be brought into the laboratory and we shall open you up and have a look at you. We will not use anesthetic, and it will be interesting to see how long you survive before your heart gives out.

And then, of course, we shall dissect your heart.'

„You’re sick!“ Alex yelled. Now he was thrashing about in the chair, trying to break the wood, trying to get the handcuffs to come apart. But it was hopeless. The metal cut into him.

The chair rocked but stayed in one piece. „You’re a madman!“

„I am a scientist!“ Dr. Grief spat the words. „And that is why I am giving you a scientific death. At least in your last minutes you will have been of some use to me.“ He looked past Alex. „Take him away and search him thoroughly. Then lock him up for the night. I’ll see him again first thing tomorrow morning.“

Alex had seen Dr. Grief summon the guards, but he hadn’t heard them come in. He was seized from behind, the handcuffs were unlocked, and he was jerked backward out of the room.

His last sight of Dr. Grief was of the man stretching out his hands to warm them in the fire, the twisting flames reflected in his glasses. Mrs. Stellenbosch smiled and blew out smoke.

Then the door slammed shut and Alex was dragged down the corridor knowing that Blunt and the secret service had to be on their way, but wondering whether they would arrive before it was too late.

BLACK RUN

THE CELL MEASURED six feet by twelve and contained a bunk bed with no mattress and a chair. Moonlight slanted in through a small, heavily barred window high up on the wall. The door was solid steel. Alex had heard a key turn in the lock after it was closed. He had not been given anything to eat or drink. The cell was cold, but there were no blankets on the bed.

At least the guards had left the handcuffs off. They had searched Alex expertly, removing everything they had found in his pockets. They had also removed his belt and the laces of his shoes. Perhaps Dr. Grief had thought he would hang himself. He needed Alex fresh and alive for the biology lesson.

It was about two o'clock in the morning, but Alex hadn't slept. He had tried to put out of his mind everything Grief had told him. That wasn't important now. He knew that he had to escape before 9:30 because—like it or not—it seemed he was on his own. More than thirty-six hours had passed since he had pressed the panic button that Smithers had given him, and nothing had happened. Either the machine hadn't worked or for some reason MI6 had decided not to come. Of course, it was possible that something might happen before breakfast the next day. But Alex wasn't prepared to risk it. He had to get out. Tonight.

For the twentieth time he went over to the door and knelt down, listening carefully. The guards had dragged him back down to the basement. He was in a corridor separate from the other prisoners. Although everything had happened very quickly, Alex had tried to remember where he had been taken. Out of the elevator and to the left. Around the corner and then down a second passageway to a door at the end. He was on his own. And listening through the door, he was fairly sure that they hadn't posted a guard outside.

Alex had one bit of hope to cling to. When the guards had searched him, they hadn't quite taken everything. Neither of them had even noticed the golden stud in his ear. What had Smithers said?

, It's a small but very powerful explosive device, like a miniature grenade. Separating the two pieces activates it. Count to ten and it'll blow a hole in just about anything.'

Now was the time to put it to the test.

Alex reached up and unscrewed the ear stud. He pulled it out of his ear, slipped the two pieces into the keyhole of the door, stepped back, and counted to ten.

Nothing happened. Was the stud broken, like the Discman transmitter? Alex was about to give up when there was a sudden flash, an intense sheet of orange flame. Fortunately there was no noise. The flare continued for about five seconds, then went out. Alex went back to the door.

The stud had burned a hole in it, the size of a silver dollar. The melted metal was still glowing.

Alex reached out and pushed. The door swung open.

Alex felt a momentary surge of excitement, but he forced himself to remain calm. He might be out of the cell, but he was still in the basement of the academy. There were guards everywhere. He was on top of a mountain with no skis and no obvious way down. He wasn't safe yet. Not by a long way.

He slipped out of the room and followed the corridor back around to the elevator. He was tempted to

find the other boys and release them, but he knew they couldn't help. Taking them out of their cells would only put them in danger. Somehow, he found his way back to the elevator. He noticed that the guard post he had seen that morning was empty. Either the man had gone to make himself coffee or Grief had relaxed security in the academy. With Alex and all the other boys locked up, there was nobody left to guard. Or so they thought. Alex hurried forward.

He took the elevator back to the second floor. He knew that his only way off the mountain lay in his bedroom. Grief would certainly have examined everything he had brought with him.

But what would he have done with it? Alex crept down the dimly lit corridor and into the room.

And there it all was, lying in a heap on his bed. The ski suit. The goggles. Even the Discman with the Beethoven CD. Alex heaved a sigh of relief. He was going to need all of it.

He had already worked out what he was going to do. He couldn't ski off the mountain because he still had no idea where the skis were kept. But there was more than one way to take to the snow. Alex froze as a guard walked along the corridor outside the room. So not everyone at the academy was asleep! He would have to move fast. As soon as the broken cell door was discovered, the alarm would be raised.

He waited until the guard had gone, then stole into the laundry room a few doors down.

When he came out, he was carrying a long, flat object made of lightweight aluminum. He carried it into his bedroom, closed the door, and turned on one small lamp. He was afraid the guard would see the light if he returned. But he couldn't work in the dark. It was a risk he had to take.

He had stolen an ironing board.

Alex had been snowboarding only three times in his life. The first time, he had spent most of the day falling or sitting on his bottom. Snowboarding is a lot harder to learn than skiing, but as soon as you get the hang of it, you can advance fast. By the third day, Alex had learned how to ride, edging and cutting his way down the beginner slopes. He needed a snowboard now. The ironing board would have to do.

He picked up the Discman and turned it on. The Beethoven CD spun, then slid forward, its diamond edge jutting out. Alex made a mental calculation, then began to cut. The ironing board was wider than he would have liked. He knew that the longer the board, the faster he could go, but if he left it too long, he would have no control. The ironing board was flat. Without any curve at the front—or the nose, as it was called—he would be at the mercy of every bump or upturned root. He pressed down. The spinning disc sliced through the metal. Carefully, Alex drew it around, forming a curve. One end of the ironing board fell away. He picked up the other. It came up to his chest. Perfect.

Now he sliced off the supports, leaving about six inches sticking up. He knew that the rider and the board can work together only if the bindings are right, and he had nothing . . . no boots, no straps, and no highback to support his heel. He was just going to have to improvise. He tore two strips of sheet from the bed, then slipped into his ski suit. He would have to tie one of his sneakers to what was left of the ironing board supports. It was horribly dangerous. If he fell, he would dislocate his foot.

But he was almost ready. Quickly, Alex zipped up the ski suit. Smithers had said it was bulletproof, and it occurred to him that he was probably going to need it. He put the goggles around his neck. The window still hadn't been repaired. He dropped the ironing board out, then climbed out after it.

There was no moon. Alex found the switch concealed in the goggles and turned it. He heard a soft hum as the concealed battery activated. Suddenly the side of the mountain glowed an eerie green and Alex was able to see the trees, the deserted ski run, and the side of the mountain, falling away.

Carefully, he took up his position on the ironing board, his right foot at forty degrees, his left foot at twenty. He was goofy-footed. That was what the instructor had told him. His feet should have been the other way around. But this was no time to worry about technique.

Instead, he used the strips of torn sheet to tie the ironing board to his feet, then he stood where he was, contemplating what he was about to do. He had only traveled down green and blue runs—the colors given to the beginners' and intermediate slopes. He knew from James that this mountain was an expert black all the way down. His breath rose up in green clouds in front of his eyes. Could he do it? Could he trust himself?

An alarm bell exploded behind him. Lights came on throughout the academy. Alex pushed forward and set off, picking up speed with every second. The decision had been made for him.

Now, whatever happened, there could be no going back.

Dr. Grief, wearing a long silver dressing gown, stood beside the open window in Alex's room. Mrs. Stellenbosch was also wearing a dressing gown. Hers was pink silk and looked strangely hideous, hanging off her lumpy body. Three guards stood watching them, waiting for instructions.

'Who searched the boy?' Dr. Grief asked. He had already been shown the cell door with the circular hole burned into the lock.

None of the guards answered, but their faces had gone pale.

'This is a question to be answered in the morning,' Dr. Grief continued. 'For now, all that matters is that we find him and kill him.'

'He must be walking down the mountainside,' Mrs. Stellenbosch said. 'He has no skis. He won't make it. We can wait until morning and pick him up in the helicopter.'

'I think the boy may be more inventive than we believe.'

Dr. Grief picked up the remains of the ironing board. 'You see? He has improvised some sort of sleigh or toboggan. All right...' He had come to a decision. Mrs. Stellenbosch was glad to see the certainty return to his eyes. 'I want two men on snowmobiles, following him down.'

Now!' One of the guards hurried out of the room.

'What about the unit at the foot of the mountain?' Mrs. Stellenbosch said.

'Indeed.' Dr. Grief smiled. He had always kept a man and a driver at the end of the last valley in case anybody ever tried to leave the academy on skis. It was a precaution that was about to pay off. 'Alex Rider will have to arrive in La Vallee de Fer. Whatever he's using to get down, he'll be unable to cross the railway line. We can have a machine gun set up, waiting for him. Assuming he does manage to get that far, he'll be a sitting duck.'

'Excellent,' Mrs. Stellenbosch purred.

'I would have liked to watch him die. But, yes. The Rider boy has no hope at all. And we can return to bed.'

Alex was on the edge of space, seemingly falling to his certain death. In snowboarding language, he was catching air, meaning that he had shot away from the ground. With every foot he went forward, the mountainside disappeared another five feet downward. He felt the world spin around him. Wind whipped into his face. Then somehow he had brought himself in line with the next section of the slope and shot down, steering the ironing board ever farther from Point Blanc. He was moving at a terrifying speed, trees and rock formations passing in a luminous green blur across his night-vision goggles. In some ways, the steeper slopes made it easier. Once, he had tried to make a landing on a flat part of the mountain—a tabletop—to slow himself down. He had hit the ground with such a bone-shattering crash that he had almost blacked out and had taken the next twenty yards almost totally blind.

The ironing board was shuddering and shaking crazily, and it took all his strength to make the turns. He was trying to follow the natural fall line of the mountain, but there were too many obstacles in the way. What he most dreaded was melted snow. If the board landed on a patch of mud at this speed, he would be thrown and killed. And he knew that the farther down he went, the greater the danger would become.

But he had been traveling for several minutes and so far he had fallen only twice—both times into thick banks of snow that had protected him. How far down could it be? He tried to remember what James Sprintz had told him, but thinking was impossible at this speed. He was having to use every ounce of his conscious thought simply to stay upright.

He reached a small lip where the surface was level and drove the edge of the board into the snow, bringing himself to a skidding halt. Ahead of him, the ground fell away again alarmingly.

He hardly dared look down. There were thick clumps of trees to the left and to the right. In the distance there was just a green blur. The goggles could see only so far.

And then he heard the sound coming up behind him.

The scream of at least two—maybe more—engines. Alex looked back over his shoulder. For a moment there was nothing. But then he saw them, black flies swimming into his field of vision. There were two of them, heading his way.

Grief's men were riding specially adapted Yamaha Mountain Max snowmobiles equipped with 700 cc triplecylinder engines. The bikes were flying over the ice on their 141-inch tracks, effortlessly moving five times faster than Alex. The 300-watt headlights had already picked him up. Now the men sped toward him, halving the distance between them with almost every second that passed.

Alex leapt forward, diving into the next slope. At the same time, there was a sudden chatter, a series of distant cracks, and the snow flew up all around him. Grief's men had machine guns built into their snowmobiles! Alex yelled as he swooped down the mountainside, barely able to control the sheet of metal under his feet. The makeshift binding was tearing at his ankles. The whole thing was vibrating crazily. He couldn't see. He could only hang on, trying to keep his balance, hoping that the way ahead was clear.

The headlights of the nearest Yamaha shot out, and Alex saw his own shadow, stretching ahead of him on the snow. There was another chatter from the machine gun and Alex ducked, almost feeling the fan of bullets spray over his head. The second bike screamed up, coming parallel with him. He had to get off the mountainside. Otherwise he would be shot or run over.

Or both.

He forced the board onto its edge, making a turn. He had seen a gap in the trees and he made for it. Now he was racing through the forest, with branches and trunks whipping past like crazy animations in a computer game. Could the snowmobiles follow him through here? The question was answered by another burst from the machine gun, ripping through the leaves and branches. Alex searched for a narrower path. The board shuddered, and he was almost thrown headfirst. The snow was getting thinner! He edged and turned, heading for two of the thickest trees. He passed between them with inches to spare.

The Yamaha snowmobile had no choice. The rider had run out of paths, and was traveling too fast to stop. He tried to follow Alex between the trees, but the snowmobile was too wide.

Alex heard the collision. There was a terrible crunch, then a scream, then an explosion. A ball of orange flame leapt over the trees, sending the black shadows in a crazy dance. Ahead of him, Alex saw another hillock and beyond it, a gap in the trees. It was time to leave the forest.

He swooped up the hillock and out, once again catching air. As he left the trees behind him, six feet in the air, he saw the second snowmobile. It had caught up with him. For a moment, the two of them were side by side. Alex doubled forward and grabbed the nose of his board. Still in midair, he twisted the tip of the board, bringing the tail swinging around. He had timed it perfectly. The tail slammed into the second rider's head, almost throwing him out of his seat.

Alex fought for balance. The rider yelled and lost control. His snowmobile jerked sideways as if trying to make an impossibly tight turn. Then it left the ground, cartwheeling over and over.

The rider was thrown off, then screamed as the snowmobile completed its final turn and landed on top of him. Man and machine bounced across the surface of the snow and lay still.

Meanwhile, Alex had slammed into the snow and skidded to a halt, his breath clouding, green, in front of his eyes.

A minute later, he pushed off again. Ahead of him, he could see that all the trails were leading into a single valley. This must be the bottleneck called La Vallee de Fer. He'd actually done it! He'd reached the bottom of the mountain. But now he was trapped. There was no other way around. He could see lights in the distance. A city. Safety. But he could also see the railway line stretching right across the valley, from the left to the right, protected on both sides by an embankment and a barbed-wire fence. The glow from the city illuminated everything. On one side the track came out of the mouth of a tunnel. It ran for about a hundred yards in a straight line before a sharp bend carried it around the other side of the valley and it disappeared from sight.

The two men in the gray van saw Alex snowboarding toward them. They were parked on a road on the other side of the railway line and had been waiting only a few minutes. They hadn't seen the explosion and wondered what had happened to the two men on their snowmobiles.

But that wasn't their concern. Their orders were to kill the boy. And there he was, right out in the open, expertly managing the last slope down through the valley. Every second brought him closer to them. There was nowhere for him to hide.

The machine gun was a Belgian FN MAG and would cut him in half.

Alex saw the van. He saw the machine gun aimed at him. He couldn't stop. It was too late to change

direction. He had come this far, but now he was finished. He felt the strength draining out of him. Where was MI6? Why did he have to die, out here, on his own?

And then there was a sudden blast as a train exploded out of the tunnel. It was a freight train, traveling about twenty miles an hour. It had at least thirty train cars being pulled by a diesel engine, and it formed a moving wall between Alex and the gun, protecting him. But it would be there only a few seconds. He had to move fast.

Barely knowing what he was doing, Alex found a last mound of snow and, using it as a launch pad, swept up into the air. Now he was level with the train ... now above it. He shifted his weight and came down onto the roof of one of the cars. The surface was covered in ice, and for a moment he thought he would fall off the other side, but he managed to swing around so that he was snowboarding along the roofs of the cars, jumping from one to another while being swept along the track—away from the gun—in a blast of freezing air.

He had done it! He had gotten away! He was still sliding forward, the train adding its speed to his own. No snowboarder had ever moved so fast. But then the train reached the bend in the track. The board had nothing to keep it from sliding on the icy surface. As the train sped around to the left, centrifugal force threw Alex to the right. Once again he soared into the air. But he had finally run out of snow.

Alex hit the ground like a rag doll. The snowboard was torn off his feet. He bounced twice, then hit a wire fence and came to rest with blood spreading around a deep gash in his head. His eyes were closed.

The train plowed on through the night. Alex lay still.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

THE GREEN-AND-WHITE ambulance raced down the Avenue Maquis de Gresivaudan in the north of Grenoble, heading toward the river. It was five o'clock in the morning and there was no traffic yet, no need for the siren. Just before the river it turned off into a compound of ugly, modern buildings. This was the second-biggest hospital in the city. The ambulance pulled up outside SERVICE DES URGENCES—the emergency room. Paramedics ran toward it as the back doors flew open.

Mrs. Jones got out of her taxi and watched as the limp, unmoving body of a boy was lowered on a stretcher, transferred to a gurney, and rushed in through the double doors. There was already a saline drip attached to his arm, and an oxygen mask covered his face. It had been snowing up in the mountains, but down here there was only a dull drizzle sweeping across the pavements. A doctor in a white coat was bending over the stretcher. He sighed and shook his head. Mrs. Jones had seen this. She crossed the road and followed the stretcher in.

A thin man with close-cropped hair wearing a black sweater and vest had also been watching the hospital. He saw Mrs. Jones without knowing who she was. He had also seen Alex. He took out a cell phone and made a call. Dr. Grief would want to know...

Three hours later, the sun had risen over the city. Grenoble is largely modern, and even with its perfect mountain setting, it still struggles to be attractive. On this damp, cloudy day it was clearly failing. Outside the hospital, another car drew up and Eva Stellenbosch got out. She was wearing a silver-and-white-checked suit with a hat perched on her ginger hair. She carried a leather handbag, and for once she had put on makeup. She wanted to look elegant. She looked like a man in drag.

She walked into the hospital and found the main reception desk. A young nurse sat behind a bank of telephones and computer screens. Mrs. Stellenbosch addressed her in fluent French.

„Excuse me,“ she said. „I understand that a young boy was brought here this morning. His name is Alex Friend.“

„One moment, please.“ The nurse entered the name in her computer. She read the information on the screen and her face became serious. „May I ask who you are?“

„I am the assistant director of the Academy at Point Blanc. He is one of our students.“

„Are you aware of the extent of his injuries, madame?“

„I was told that he was involved in a snowboard accident.“ Mrs. Stellenbosch took out a small handkerchief and dabbed at her eye.

„He tried to snowboard down the mountain at night. He was involved in a collision with a train. His injuries are very serious, madame. The doctors are operating on him now.“

Mrs. Stellenbosch nodded, swallowing her tears. „My name is Eva Stellenbosch,“ she said.

„May I wait for any news?“

„Of course, madame.“

Mrs. Stellenbosch took a seat in the reception area. For the next hour, she watched as people came and went, some walking, some in wheelchairs. There were other people waiting for news of other

patients. One of them, she noticed, was a serious-looking woman with badly cut black hair and very black eyes. She was no doubt from England, as she was periodically glancing at a copy of the *London Times*.

Then a door opened and a doctor in a white coat came out. Doctors have a certain face when they come to give bad news. This doctor had it now. ‚Madame Stellenbosch?’ he asked.

‚Yes?’

‚You are the director of the school?’

‚The assistant director. Yes.’

The doctor sat next to her. ‚I am very sorry, madame. Alex Friend died a few minutes ago.’

He waited while she absorbed the news. ‚He had multiple fractures: his arms, his collarbone, his leg. He had also fractured his skull. We operated, but unfortunately there had been massive internal bleeding. He went into shock and we were unable to bring him around.’

Mrs. Stellenbosch nodded, struggling for words. ‚I must notify his family,’ she whispered.

‚Is he from this country?’

‚No. He is English. His father ... Sir David Friend ... I’ll have to tell him.’ Mrs. Stellenbosch got to her feet.

‚Thank you, Doctor. I’m sure you did everything you could.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Stellenbosch noticed that the woman with the black hair had also stood up, letting her newspaper fall to the floor. She had overheard the conversation.

She looked shocked.

Both women left the hospital at the same time. Neither of them spoke.

The aircraft waiting on the runway was a Lockheed Martin C- 130 Hercules. It had landed just after midday. Now it waited beneath the clouds while three vehicles drove toward it. One was a police car, one a jeep, and one an ambulance.

The Saint-Geoirs airport at Grenoble does not see many international flights, but the plane had flown out that morning from England. From the other side of the perimeter fence, Mrs. Stellenbosch watched through a pair of high-powered binoculars. A small military escort had been formed. Four men in French uniforms had lifted up a coffin that seemed pathetically small when balanced on their broad shoulders. The coffin was simple: pine wood with silver handles. A Union Jack was folded into a square in the middle.

Marching in time, they carried the coffin toward the waiting plane. Mrs. Stellenbosch focused the binoculars and saw the woman from the hospital. She had been traveling in the police car. She stood watching as the coffin was loaded into the plane, then got back into the car and was driven away. By now, Mrs. Stellenbosch knew who she was. Dr. Grief kept extensive files and had quickly identified her as Mrs. Jones, head of Special Operations for MI6 and number two to its chief, Alan Blunt.

Mrs. Stellenbosch stayed until the end. The doors of the plane were closed. The jeep and the ambulance left. The plane’s propellers began to turn, and it lumbered forward onto the runway.

A few minutes later it took off. As it thundered into the air, the clouds opened as if to receive it, and for a moment its silver wings were bathed in brilliant sunlight. Then the clouds rolled back and the plane disappeared.

Mrs. Stellenbosch dialed a number on her cell phone and waited until she was connected.

‘The little swine has gone,’ she said.

She got back into her car and drove away.

After Mrs. Jones left the airport, she returned to the hospital and took the stairs to the second floor. She came to a pair of doors guarded by a policeman, who nodded and let her pass through. On the other side was a corridor leading to a private wing. She walked down to a door, this one also guarded by a policeman. She didn’t knock, but went straight in.

Alex Rider was standing by the window, looking out at the view of Grenoble on the other side of the River Isere. High above him, five steel and glass bubbles moved slowly along a cable, ferrying tourists up to the Fort de la Bastille. He turned around as Mrs. Jones came in. There was a bandage around his head, but otherwise he seemed unhurt.

‘You’re lucky to be alive,’ she said.

‘I thought I was dead,’ Alex replied.

‘Let’s hope that Dr. Grief believes as much.’ Despite herself, Mrs. Jones couldn’t keep the worry out of her eyes. ‘It really was a miracle,’ she said. ‘You should have at least broken something.’

‘The ski suit protected me,’ Alex said. He tried to think back to the whirling, desperate moment when he had been thrown off the train. ‘There was undergrowth. And the fence sort of caught me.’ He rubbed his leg and winced. ‘Even if it was barbed wire.’

He walked back to the bed and sat down. After they had finished examining him, the French doctors had brought him fresh clothes. Military clothes, he noticed. Combat jacket and trousers. He hoped they weren’t trying to tell him something.

‘I’ve got three questions,’ he said. ‘But let’s start with the big one. I called for help two days ago. Where were you?’

‘I’m very sorry, Alex,’ Mrs. Jones said. ‘There were ... logistical problems.’

‘Yes? Well, while you were having your logistical problems, Dr. Grief was getting ready to cut me up!’

‘We couldn’t just storm the academy. That could have gotten you killed. It could have gotten you all killed. We had to move in slowly—try to work out what was going on. How do you think we found you so quickly?’

‘That was my second question.’

Mrs. Jones shrugged. ‘We’ve had people in the mountains ever since we got your signal.’

They’ve been closing in on the academy. They heard the machine-gun fire when the snowmobiles were chasing you and followed you down on skis. They saw what happened with the train and radioed for help.’

„All right. So why all the business with the funeral? Why do you want Dr. Grief to think I'm dead?“

„That's simple, Alex. From what you've told us, he's keeping fifteen boys prisoner in the academy. These are the boys that he plans to replace.“ She shook her head. „I have to say, it's the most incredible thing I've ever heard. And I wouldn't have believed it if I'd heard it from anyone else except you.“

„You're too kind,“ Alex muttered.

„If Dr. Grief thought you'd survived last night, the first thing he would do is kill every one of those boys. Or perhaps he'd use them as hostages. We had only one hope if we were going to take him by surprise. He had to believe you were dead.“

„You're going to take him by surprise?“

„We're going in tonight. I told you. We've assembled an attack squad here in Grenoble.

They were up in the mountains last night. They plan to set off as soon as it's dark. They're armed and they're experienced.“ Mrs. Jones hesitated. „There's just one thing they don't have.“

„And what's that?“ Alex asked, feeling a sudden sense of unease.

„They need someone who knows the building,“ Mrs. Jones said. „The library, the secret elevator, the placement of the guards, the passage with the cells...“

„Oh, no!“ Alex exclaimed. Now he understood the military clothes. „Forget it! I'm not going back up there. I almost got killed trying to get away! Do you think I'm crazy?“

„Alex, you'll be looked after. You'll be completely safe.“

„No!“

Mrs. Jones nodded. „All right. I can understand your feelings. But there's someone I want you to meet.“

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door. It opened to reveal a young man, also in combat dress. The man was well built with black hair, square shoulders, and a dark, watchful face. He was in his late twenties. He saw Alex and shook his head. „Well, well, well. There's a surprise,“

he said. „How's it going, Cub?“

Alex recognized him at once. It was the soldier he had known as Wolf. When MI6 had sent him for eleven days' SAS training in Wales, Wolf had been in charge of his unit. If training had been hell, Wolf had only made it worse, picking on Alex from the start and almost getting him thrown out. In the end, though, it had been Wolf who had nearly lost his place with the SAS, and Alex who had saved him. But Alex still wasn't sure where that left him, and the other man was giving nothing away.

„Wolf!“ Alex said.

„I heard you got busted up.“ Wolf shrugged. „I'm sorry. I forgot the flowers and the fruit basket.“

„What are you doing here?“ Alex asked.

„They called me in to clear up the mess you left behind.“

„So where were you when I was being chased down the mountain?“

„It seems you were doing fine on your own.“

Mrs. Jones took over. „Alex has done a very good job up to now,“ she said. „But the fact is that there are fifteen young prisoners up at Point Blanc and our first priority must be to save them. From what Alex has told us, we know there are about thirty guards in and around the school. The only chance those boys have is for an SAS unit to break in. It’s happening tonight.“

She turned to Alex. „The unit will be commanded by Wolf.“

The SAS never uses rank when it is on active service. Mrs. Jones was careful only to use Wolf’s code name.

„Where does the boy come into this?“ Wolf demanded.

„He knows the school. He knows the position of the guards and the location of the prison cells. He can lead you to the elevator.“

„He can tell us everything we need to know here and now,“ Wolf interrupted. He turned to Mrs. Jones. „We don’t need a kid,“ he said. „He’s just going to be baggage. We’re going in on skis. There’ll be blood. I can’t waste one of my men holding his hand.“

„I don’t need to have my hand held,“ Alex retorted angrily. „She’s right. I know more about Point Blanc than any of you. I’ve been there—and I got out of there, no thanks to you. Also, I’ve met some of those boys. One of them is a friend of mine. I promised I’d help him, and I will.“

„Not if you get killed.“

„I can look after myself!“

„Then it’s agreed,“ Mrs. Jones said. „Alex will lead you in there, but then will take no further part in the operation. And as for his safety, Wolf, I will hold you personally responsible.“

„Personally responsible. Right,“ Wolf growled.

Alex couldn’t resist a smile. He’d held his ground, and he’d be going back in with the SAS.

Then he realized what had happened. A few moments ago, he’d been arguing violently against doing just that. He glanced at the head of Special Operations. She’d manipulated him, of course, bringing Wolf into the room. And she knew it.

Wolf nodded. „All right, Cub,“ he said. „Looks like you’re in. Let’s go and play.“

„Sure, Wolf,“ Alex sighed. „Let’s go and play.“

NIGHT RAID

THEY CAME SKIING DOWN from the mountain. There were seven of them, Wolf in front, Alex at his side. The other five men followed behind. They had changed into white trousers, jackets, and hoods—camouflage that would help them blend into the snow. A helicopter had dropped them two miles north and two hundred yards above Point Blanc, and equipped with night-vision goggles, they had quickly made their way down. The weather had settled again.

The moon was out. Despite himself, Alex enjoyed the journey, the whisper of the skis cutting through the ice, the empty mountainside bathed in white light. And he was part of a crack SAS unit. He felt safe.

But then the academy loomed up below him, and once again he shivered. Before they had left, he had asked for a gun, but Wolf had shaken his head.

„I'm sorry, Cub. It's orders. You get us in, then you get out of sight.“

It was the same old story. When they needed him, he was a man. When he asked to protect himself, he was just a kid.

There were no lights showing in the building. The helicopter had arrived back from Paris, crouching on the helipad like a glittering insect. The ski jump stood to one side, dark and forgotten. There was nobody in sight. Wolf held up a hand and they sliced to a halt.

„Guards?“ he whispered.

„Two patrolling. One on the roof.“

„Let's take him out first.“

Mrs. Jones had made her instructions absolutely clear. There was to be no bloodshed unless absolutely necessary. The mission was to get the boys out. The SAS could take care of Dr. Grief, Mrs. Stellenbosch, and the guards at a later date.

Now Wolf held out a hand and one of the other men passed him something. It was a crossbow—not the medieval sort but a sophisticated, high-tech weapon with a microflite aluminium barrel and laser scope. He loaded it with an anesthetic dart, lifted it up, and took aim. Alex saw him smile to himself. Then his finger curled and the dart flashed across the night, traveling at three hundred feet per second. There was a faint sound from the roof of the academy. It was as if someone had coughed. Wolf lowered the crossbow.

„One down,“ he said.

„Sure,“ Alex muttered. „And about twenty-nine to go.“

Wolf signaled and they continued down, more slowly now. They were about twenty yards from the school when they saw the main door open. Two men walked out, machine guns hanging from their shoulders. As one, the SAS men veered to the right, disappearing around the side of the school. They stopped within reach of the wall, dropping down to lie flat on their stomachs. Two of the men had moved slightly ahead. Alex noticed that they had kicked off their skis at the very same moment they had come to a halt.

The two guards approached. One of them was talking quietly in German. Alex's face was half buried in the snow. He knew the combat clothes would make him invisible. He half lifted his head just in time to see two figures rise out of the ground like ghosts from the grave. Two blackjacks swung in the moonlight. The guards crumpled. In seconds they were tied up and gagged. They wouldn't be going anywhere that night.

Wolf signaled again. The men got up and ran forward, making for the main door. Alex hastily pulled his own skis off and followed. They reached the door in a line, their backs against the wall. Wolf looked inside to make sure it was safe. He nodded. They went in.

They were back in the hall with the stone dragons and the animal heads. Alex found himself next to Wolf and quickly gave him his bearings, pointing out the different rooms.

„The library?“ Wolf whispered. He was totally serious now. Alex could see the tension in his eyes.

„Through here.“

Wolf took a step forward, then crouched down, his hand whipping into one of the pouches of his jacket. Another guard had appeared, patrolling the lower corridor. Dr. Grief was taking no more chances. Wolf waited until the man had gone past and then nodded. One of the other SAS men went after him. Alex heard a thud and the soft clatter of a gun dropping.

„So far so good,“ Wolf whispered.

They went into the library. Alex showed Wolf how to summon the elevator, and Wolf whistled softly as the suit of armor smoothly divided into two parts. „This is quite a place,“ he muttered.

„Are you going up or down?“

„Down. Let's make sure the kids are all right.“

There was just room for all seven of them in the elevator. Alex had warned Wolf about the guard at the table, in sight of the elevator, and Wolf took no chances: he came out firing. In fact, two guards were there. One of them was holding a mug of coffee while the other lit a cigarette.

Wolf fired twice. Two more anesthetic darts traveled the short distance along the corridor and found their targets. Again, it had all happened in almost total silence. The two guards collapsed and lay still. The SAS men stepped out into the corridor.

Suddenly Alex remembered. He was angry with himself for not mentioning it before. „You can't go into the cells,“ he whispered. „They're wired up for sound.“

Wolf nodded. „Show me!“

Alex showed Wolf the passage with the steel-lined doors. Wolf pointed to two of the men. „I want you to stay here. If we're found, this is the first place Grief will come.“

The men nodded. They understood. The rest of them went back to the elevator, up to the library, and out into the hall.

Wolf turned to Alex. „We're going to have to deactivate the system,“ he explained. „Do you have any idea ...?“

„This way. Grief's private rooms are on the other side.“

But before he could finish, three more guards appeared, walking down the passageway.

Wolf shot one of them another anesthetic dart—and one of his men took out the other two. But this time they were a fraction of a second too slow. Alex saw one of the guards bring his gun around. He was probably unconscious before he managed to fire. But at the last moment, his finger tightened on the trigger. Bullets sprayed upward, smashing into the ceiling, bringing plaster and wood splinters showering down. Nobody had been hit, but the damage had been done. The lights flashed on. Once again, the alarm began to ring.

Twenty yards away, a door opened and more guards poured through.

„Down!“ Wolf shouted.

He had produced a grenade. He tugged the pin out and threw it. Alex hit the ground, and a second later there was a soft explosion as a great cloud of tear gas filled the far end of the passage. The guards staggered, blind and helpless. The SAS men quickly took them out.

Wolf grabbed hold of him and dragged him close. „Find somewhere to hide!“ he shouted.

„You’ve got us in. We’ll do the rest now.“

„Give me a gun!“ Alex shouted back. Some of the gas had reached him, and he could feel his eyes burning.

„No. I’ve got orders. At the first sign of trouble, you’re to get out of the way. Find somewhere safe. We’ll come for you later.“

„Wolf!“

But Wolf was already up and running. Alex heard machinegun fire coming from somewhere below. So Wolf had been right. One of the guards had been sent to take care of the prisoners—but there had been two SAS men waiting for him. And now the rules had changed.

The SAS couldn’t afford to risk the lives of the prisoners. There was going to be bloodshed. Alex could only imagine the battle that must be taking place. But he was to be no part of it. His job was to hide.

More explosions. More gunfire. There was a bitter taste in Alex’s mouth as he made his way back to the stairs. It was typical of MI6. Half the time they would happily get him killed. The other half they treated him like a child. A guard appeared suddenly, running toward the sound of the fighting. Alex’s eyes were still smarting from the gas, and now he made use of it. He brought his hand up to his face, pretending to cry. The guard saw a fourteen-year-old boy in tears. He stopped. At that moment Alex twisted around on his left foot, driving the upper part of his right foot sideways into the man’s stomach—the roundhouse kick or mawashi-geri he had learned in karate. The guard didn’t even have time to cry out. His eyes rolled and he went limp. Alex felt a little better after that.

But there was still nothing more for him to do. There was another round of gunfire, then the quiet blast of a second gas grenade. Alex went into the dining room. From here he could look out through the windows at the side of the building and the helipad above. He noticed that the blades of the helicopter were turning. Somebody was inside it! He moved closer to the window.

It was Dr. Grief! He had to let Wolf know.

He turned around.

Mrs. Stellenbosch was standing in front of him.

He had never seen her look less human. Her entire face was contorted with anger, her lips rolled outward, her eyes ablaze.

‘You didn’t die!’ she exclaimed. ‘You’re still alive!’ Her voice was almost a whine, as if somehow none of it had been fair. ‘You brought them here. You’ve ruined everything!’

‘That’s what I’m paid for,’ Alex said.

‘What was it that made me look in here?’ Mrs. Stellenbosch giggled to herself. Alex could almost see the sanity slipping out of her. ‘Well, at least this is one bit of business I’m finally going to be able to finish.’

Alex tensed himself, feet apart, gravity center low, just like he had been taught. But it was useless. Mrs. Stellenbosch lurched into him, moving with frightening speed. It was like being run over by a bus. Alex felt the full impact of her body weight, then cried out as two massive hands seized hold of him and threw him headfirst across the room. He crashed into a table, knocking it over, then rolled out of the way as Mrs. Stellenbosch followed up her first attack, lashing out with a kick that would have taken his head off his shoulders if it hadn’t missed by less than an inch.

He scrambled to his feet and stood there, panting for breath. For a moment his vision was blurred. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. Mrs. Stellenbosch charged again. Alex threw himself forward, using another of the tables for leverage. His feet swung around, scything through the air, both his heels catching her on the back of the head.

Anyone else would have been knocked out by the blow. But although Alex felt the jolt of it running all the way up his body, Mrs. Stellenbosch hardly faltered. As Alex left the table, her hands swung down, smashing through the thick wood. The table fell apart and she walked through it, grabbing him again, this time by the neck. Alex felt his feet leave the floor. With a grunt she hurled him against the wall. Alex yelled, wondering if his back had been broken. He slid to the floor. He couldn’t move.

Mrs. Stellenbosch stopped, breathing heavily. She glanced out the window. The helicopter’s blades were at full speed now. The helicopter rocked forward then slowly rose into the air. It was time to go.

She reached down and picked up her handbag. She took out a gun and aimed at Alex. Alex stared at her. There was nothing he could do.

Mrs. Stellenbosch smiled. ‘And this is what I am paid for,’ she said.

The dining room door swung open.

‘Alex!’ It was Wolf. He was holding a machine gun.

Mrs. Stellenbosch lifted the gun up and fired three shots. Each one of them hit its target.

Wolf was hit in the shoulder, the arm, and the chest. But even as he fell back, he opened fire himself. The heavy bullets slammed into Mrs. Stellenbosch. She was hurled backward into the window, which smashed behind her. With a scream she disappeared into the night and the snow, headfirst, her heavy, stockinged legs trailing behind.

The shock of what had happened gave Alex new strength. He got to his feet and ran over to Wolf. The SAS man wasn't dead, but he was badly hurt, his breath rattling.

„I'm okay,“ he managed to say. „Came looking for you. Glad I found you.“

„Wolf...“

„Okay.“ He tapped at his chest and Alex saw that he was wearing body armor under his jacket. There was blood coming from his arm, but the other two bullets hadn't reached him.

„Grief...“ he said.

Wolf gestured, and Alex looked around. The helicopter had left its launchpad. It was flying low outside the academy. Alex saw Dr. Grief in the pilot's seat. He had a gun. He fired. There was a yell, and a body fell from somewhere above. One of the SAS men.

Suddenly Alex was angry. Grief was a freak, a monster. He was responsible for all this—and he was going to get away. Not knowing what he was doing, he snatched up Wolf's gun and ran through the broken window, past the dead body of Mrs. Stellenbosch and into the night. He tried to aim. The blades of the helicopter were whipping up the surface snow, blinding him, but he pointed the gun up and fired. Nothing happened. He pulled the trigger again. Still nothing.

Either Wolf had used all his ammunition or the gun had jammed.

Dr. Grief pulled at the controls and the helicopter banked away, following the slope of the mountain. It was too late. Nothing could stop him.

Unless ...

Alex threw down the gun and ran forward. There was a snowmobile lying idle a few yards away, its engine still running. The man who had been riding it was lying facedown in the snow.

Alex leapt onto the seat and turned the throttle full on. The snowmobile roared away, skimming over the ice, following the path of the helicopter.

Dr. Grief saw him. The helicopter slowed and turned. Grief raised a hand, waving goodbye. Alex caught sight of the red glasses, the slender fingers raised in one last gesture of defiance. With his hands gripping the handlebars, Alex stood up on the foot grips, tensing himself for what he knew he had to do. The helicopter moved away again, gaining altitude. In front of Alex loomed the ski jump. He was traveling at seventy, eighty miles per hour, snow and wind rushing past him. Ahead of him there was a wooden barrier, shaped like a cross.

Alex smashed through it, then threw himself off.

The snowmobile plunged down, its engine screaming.

Alex rolled over and over in the snow, ice and wood splinters in his eyes and mouth. He managed to get to his knees.

The snowmobile reached the end of the ski jump.

Alex watched it rocket into the air, propelled by the huge metal slide.

In the helicopter, Dr. Grief just had time to see five hundred pounds of solid steel come hurtling toward him out of the night, its headlights blazing, its engine still screaming. His eyes, bright red,

opened wide in shock. The makeshift torpedo hit its target full-on. Point-blank.

The explosion lit up the entire mountain. The helicopter disappeared in a huge fireball, then plunged down. It was still burning when it hit the ground.

Behind him, Alex became aware that the shooting had stopped. The battle was over. He walked slowly back to the academy, shivering suddenly in the cold night air. As he approached, a man appeared at the broken window and waved. It was Wolf, propping himself against the wall, but still very much alive. Alex went over to him.

,What happened to Grief?' he asked.

,It looks like I 'sleighed' him,' Alex replied.

On the slopes, the wreckage of the helicopter flickered and burned as the morning sun began to rise.

DEAD RINGER

A FEW DAYS LATER, ALEX found himself sitting opposite Alan Blunt in the faceless office on Liverpool Street, with Mrs. Jones twisting another peppermint between her fingers. It was May 1, a bank holiday in England, but somehow he knew that holidays never came to the building that called itself the Royal & General Bank. Even the spring seemed to have stopped at the window. Outside, the sun was shining. Inside, there were only shadows.

„It seems that once again we owe you a debt of thanks,“ Blunt was saying.

„You don’t owe me anything,“ Alex said.

Blunt looked genuinely puzzled. „You have quite possibly changed the future of this planet,“ he said. „Of course, Grief’s plan was monstrous, crazy. But the fact remains that his...“

He searched for a word to describe the test-tube creations that had been sent out of Point Blanc.

„...his offspring could have caused a great many problems. At the very least they would have had money. God knows what they would have done had they remained undiscovered.“

„What’s happened to them?“ Alex asked.

„We’ve traced all fifteen of them, and we have them under lock and key,“ Mrs. Jones answered. „They were quietly arrested by the intelligence services of each country where they lived. We’ll take care of them.“

Alex shivered. He had a feeling he knew what Mrs. Jones had meant by those last words.

And he was certain that nobody would ever see the fifteen Grief replicas again.

„Once again, we’ve had to hush this up,“ Blunt continued. „This whole business of ...

cloning. It causes a great deal of public disquiet. Sheep are one thing—but human beings!“ He coughed. „The families involved in this business have no desire for publicity, so they won’t be talking. They’re just glad to have had their real sons returned to them. The same, of course, goes for you, Alex. You’ve already signed the Official Secrets Act. I’m sure we can trust you to be discreet.“

There was a moment’s pause. Mrs. Jones looked carefully at Alex. She had to admit that she was worried about him. She knew everything that had happened at Point Blanc, how close he had come to a horrible death, only to be sent back into the academy for a second time. The boy who had come back from the French Alps was different from the one who had left. There was a coldness about him, as tangible as the mountain snow.

„You did very well, Alex,“ she said.

„How is Wolf?“ Alex asked.

„He’s fine. He’s still in the hospital, but the doctors say he’ll make a complete recovery. We hope to have him back on operations in a few weeks.“

„That’s good.“

„We had only one fatality in the raid on Point Blanc. That was the man you saw falling from the roof.“

Wolf and another man were injured. Otherwise, it was a complete success.’ She paused. ‘Is there anything else you want to know?’

‘No.’ Alex shook his head. He stood up. ‘You left me in there,’ he said. ‘I called for help and you didn’t come. Grief was going to kill me, but you didn’t care.’

‘That’s not true, Alex.’ Mrs. Jones glanced at Blunt for support, but he didn’t meet her eyes.

‘There were difficulties...’

‘It doesn’t matter. I just want you to know that I’ve had enough. I don’t want to be a spy anymore, and if you ask me again, I’ll refuse. I know you think you can blackmail me. But I know too much about you now, so that won’t work anymore.’ He walked over to the door. ‘I used to think that being a spy would be exciting and special, like in the films. But you just used me. In a way, the two of you are as bad as Grief. You’ll do anything to get what you want. Well, I want to go back to school. Next time, you can do it without me.’

There was a long silence after Alex had left. At last Blunt spoke. ‘He’ll be back,’ he said.

Mrs. Jones raised an eyebrow. ‘You really think so?’

‘He’s too good at what he does—too good at the job. And it’s in his blood.’ He stood up.

‘It’s rather odd,’ he said. ‘Most schoolboys dream of being a spy. With Alex, we have a spy who dreams of being a schoolboy.’

‘Will you really use him again?’ Mrs. Jones asked.

‘Of course. There was a file that came in only this morning. An interesting case. Right up his alley.’ He smiled. ‘We’ll give him a few days to settle down and then we’ll call him.’

‘He won’t answer.’

‘We’ll see,’ Blunt said.

Alex walked home from the bus stop and let himself into the elegant Chelsea house that he shared with his housekeeper and closest friend, Jack Starbright. Jack knew where Alex had been and what he had been doing. But the two of them had made an agreement never to discuss his involvement with MI6. She didn’t like it, and she worried about him. But ultimately, they both knew, there was nothing more to be said.

She seemed surprised to see him. ‘I thought you’d just gone out,’ she said.

‘No.’

‘Did you get the message by the phone?’

‘What message?’

‘Mr. Bray wants to see you this afternoon. Three o’clock at the school.’

Henry Bray was the principal at Brookland. Alex wasn’t surprised by the summons. Bray was the sort of principal who managed to run a busy school and still find time to take a personal interest in every pupil there. He had been worried by Alex’s long absence at the start of spring term. The fact that Alex had also missed the last two weeks of the same term had worried him more. So he had called a meeting.

,Do you want lunch?' Jack asked.

,No, thanks.' Alex knew that he would have to pretend he had been ill again. Doubtless MI6 would produce another doctor's note in due course. But the thought of lying to his principal had spoiled his appetite.

He set off an hour later, taking his bicycle, which had been returned to the house by the Putney police. He cycled slowly. It was good to be back in London, to be surrounded by normal life. He turned off the King's Road and pedaled down the side road where—it felt like a month ago—he had followed the man in the white Skoda. The school loomed up ahead of him. It was empty now and would remain so until the summer term.

But as Alex arrived, he saw a figure walking across the yard to the school gates and recognized Mr. Lee, the elderly school caretaker.

,You again!'

,Hello, Bernie,' Alex said. That was what everyone called him.

,On your way to see Mr. Bray?'

,Yeah.'

The caretaker shook his head. ,He never told me he was going to be here today. But he never tells me anything! I'm just going down to the shops. I'll be back at five to lock up, so make sure you're out by then.'

,Right, Bernie.'

There was nobody in the school yard. It felt strange, walking across the tarmac on his own.

The school seemed bigger with nobody there, the yard stretching out too far between the redbrick buildings with the sun beating down, reflecting off the windows. Alex was dazzled.

He had never seen the place so empty and so quiet. The grass on the playing fields looked almost too green. Any school without schoolchildren has its own peculiar atmosphere, and Brookland was no exception.

Mr. Bray had an office in D block, which was next to the science building. Alex reached the swinging doors and opened them. The walls here would normally be covered in posters, but they had all been taken down at the end of the term. Everything was blank, off-white. There was another door open to one side. Bernie had been cleaning the main laboratory. He had rested his mop and bucket to one side when he had gone to the shops—to pick up cigarettes, Alex presumed. The man had been a chain smoker all his life, and Alex knew he'd die with a cigarette between his lips.

Alex climbed up the stairs, his heels rapping against the stone surface. He reached a corridor—left for biology, right for physics—and continued straight ahead. A second corridor, with full-length windows on both sides, led into D block. Bray's study was directly ahead of him. He stopped at the door, vaguely wondering if he should have dressed up for the meeting.

Bray was always snapping at boys with their shirts hanging out or crooked ties. Alex was wearing a Gortex jacket, T-shirt, jeans, and Nike sneakers—the same clothes he had worn that morning at MI6. His hair was still too short for his liking, although it had begun to grow back.

All in all, he still looked like a juvenile delinquent—but it was too late now. And anyway, Bray didn't want to see him to discuss his appearance. His nonappearance at school was more to the point.

He knocked on the door.

,Come in!' a voice called.

Alex opened the door and walked into the principal's study, a cluttered room with views over the school yard. There was a desk, piled high with papers, and a black leather chair with its back toward the door. A cabinet full of trophies stood against one wall. The others were mainly lined with books.

,You wanted to see me,' Alex said.

The chair turned slowly around.

Alex froze.

It wasn't Henry Bray sitting behind the desk.

It was himself.

He was looking at a fourteen-year-old boy with fair hair cut very short, brown eyes, and a slim, pale face. The boy was even dressed identically to him. It took Alex what felt like an eternity to accept what he was seeing. He was standing in a room looking at himself sitting in a chair. The boy was him.

With just one difference. The boy was holding a gun.

,Come in,' he said.

Alex didn't move. He knew what he was facing and he was angry with himself for not having expected it. When he had been handcuffed at the academy, Dr. Grief had boasted to him that he had cloned himself sixteen times. But that morning Mrs. Jones had traced ,all fifteen of them.' That left one spare—one boy waiting to take his place in the family of Sir David Friend.

Alex had glimpsed him while he was at the academy. Now he remembered the figure with the white mask, watching him from a window as he walked over to the ski jump. The white mask had been bandages. The new Alex had been spying on him as he recovered from the plastic surgery that had made the two of them identical.

And even today there had been clues. Perhaps it had been the heat of the sun, or the fallout from his visit to MI6. But he had been too wrapped up in his own thoughts to see them.

Jack, when he got home. , *I thought you'd just gone out.*

Bernie, at the gate. , *You again!*'

They had both thought they'd seen him. And in a sense, they had. They had seen the boy sitting opposite him. The boy who was now aiming a gun at his heart.

,I've been looking forward to this,' the other boy said, and despite the hatred in his voice, Alex couldn't help marveling. The voice wasn't the same as his. The boy hadn't had enough time to get it right. But otherwise he was a dead ringer.

,What are you doing here?' Alex said. ,It's all over. The Gemini Project is finished. You might as well turn yourself in. You need help.'

‘I need just one thing,’ the second Alex sneered. ‘I need to see you dead. I’m going to shoot you. I’m going to do it now. You killed my father!’

‘Your father was a test tube,’ Alex said. ‘You never had a mother or a father. You’re a freak. Handmade in the French Alps, like a cuckoo clock. What are you going to do when you’ve killed me? Take my place? You wouldn’t last a week. You may look like me, but too many people know what Grief was trying to do. And I’m sorry, but you’ve got ‘fake’ written all over you.’

‘We would have had everything! We would have had the whole world!’ The replica Alex almost screamed the words, and for a moment Alex thought he heard Dr. Grief somewhere in there, blaming him from beyond the grave. But then the creature in front of him *was* Dr. Grief...

or part of him. ‘I don’t care what happens to me,’ he went on, ‘just so long as you’re dead.’

The hand with the gun stretched out. The barrel was pointing at him. Alex looked the boy straight in the eyes.

And he saw the hesitation.

The fake Alex couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. They were too similar. The same clothes, the same bodies, the same faces. For the other boy, it would be like shooting himself. Alex still hadn’t closed the door. He threw himself backward, out into the corridor. At the same time, the gun went off, the bullet exploding inches above his head and crashing into the far wall. Alex hit the ground on his back and rolled out of the doorway as a second bullet slammed into the floor.

And then he was running, putting as much space between himself and his double as he could.

There was a third shot as he sprinted down the corridor, and the window next to him shattered, glass showering down. Alex reached the stairs and took them three at a time, afraid that he would trip and break an ankle. But then he was at the bottom, heading for the main door, swerving only when he realized that he would make too easy a target as he crossed the school yard. Instead he dived into the laboratory, almost falling headfirst over Bernie’s bucket and mop.

The laboratory was long and rectangular, divided into workstations with Bunsen burners, flasks, and dozens of bottles of chemicals spread out on shelves that stretched the full length of the room. There was another door at the far end. Alex dived behind the farthest desk. Would his double have seen him come in? Might he be looking for him, even now, out in the yard?

Cautiously, Alex poked his head over the surface, then ducked down as four bullets ricocheted around him, splintering the wood and smashing one of the gas pipes. Alex heard the hiss of escaping gas. Then there was another gunshot and an explosion that hurled him backward, sprawling onto the floor. The last bullet had ignited the gas. Flames leapt up, licking at the ceiling. At the same time, the sprinkler system went off, spraying the entire room. Alex tracked back on his hands and feet, searching for shelter behind fire and water, hoping the other Alex would be blinded. His shoulders hit the far door. He scrambled to his feet. There was another shot. But then he was through—with another corridor and a second flight of stairs straight ahead.

The stairs led nowhere. He was halfway up before he remembered. There was a single classroom at the top that was used for biology. It had a spiral staircase leading to the roof. The school had so little land that they’d planned to build a roof garden. Then they’d run out of money. There were a couple of greenhouses. Nothing more.

There was no way down! Alex looked over his shoulder and saw the other Alex reloading his gun, already on his way up. He had no choice. He had to continue even though he would soon be trapped.

He reached the biology classroom and slammed the door shut behind him. There was no lock, and the tables were all bolted into the floor. Otherwise he might be able to make a barricade. The spiral staircase was ahead of him. He ran up it without stopping, through another door and onto the roof. Alex stopped to catch his breath and see what he could do next.

He was standing on a wide, flat area with a fence running all the way around. There were half a dozen terra-cotta pots filled with earth. A few plants sprouted out, looking more dead than alive. Alex sniffed the air. Smoke was curling up from the windows two floors below, and he realized that the sprinkler system had been unable to put out the fire. He thought of the gas, pouring into the room, and the chemicals stacked up on the shelves. He could be standing on a time bomb! He had to find a way down.

But then he heard the sound of feet on metal and realized that his double had reached the top of the spiral staircase. Alex ducked behind one of the greenhouses. The door crashed open.

Smoke followed the fake Alex out onto the roof. He took a step forward. Now Alex was behind him.

‘Where are you?’ the fake Alex shouted. His hair was soaked and his face contorted with anger.

Alex knew his moment had come. He would never have a better chance. He ran forward.

The other Alex twisted around and fired. The bullet creased his shoulder, a molten sword drawn across his flesh. But a second later he had reached him, grabbing him around the neck with one hand and seizing hold of his wrist with the other, forcing the gun away. There was a huge explosion in the laboratory below and the entire building shook, but neither of the boys seemed to notice. They were locked in an embrace, two reflections that had become tangled up in the mirror, the gun over their heads, fighting for control.

The flames were tearing through the building. Fed by a variety of chemicals, they burst through the floor, melting the asphalt. In the far distance, the scream of fire engines penetrated the sun-filled air. Alex pulled with all his strength, trying to bring the gun down. The other Alex clawed at him, swearing—not in English but in Afrikaans.

The end came very suddenly.

The gun twisted and fell to the ground.

One Alex lashed out, knocking the other one down, then dived for the gun.

There was another explosion, and a sheet of chemical flame leapt up. A crater had suddenly appeared in the roof, swallowing up the gun. The boy saw it too late and fell through. With a yell, he disappeared into the smoke and fire.

One Alex Rider walked over to the hole and looked down.

The other Alex Rider lay on his back, two floors below. He wasn’t moving. The flames were closing in.

The first fire engines had arrived at the school. A ladder slanted up toward the roof.

A boy with short fair hair and brown eyes, wearing a Gortex jacket, T-shirt, and jeans, walked to the

edge of the roof and began to climb down.

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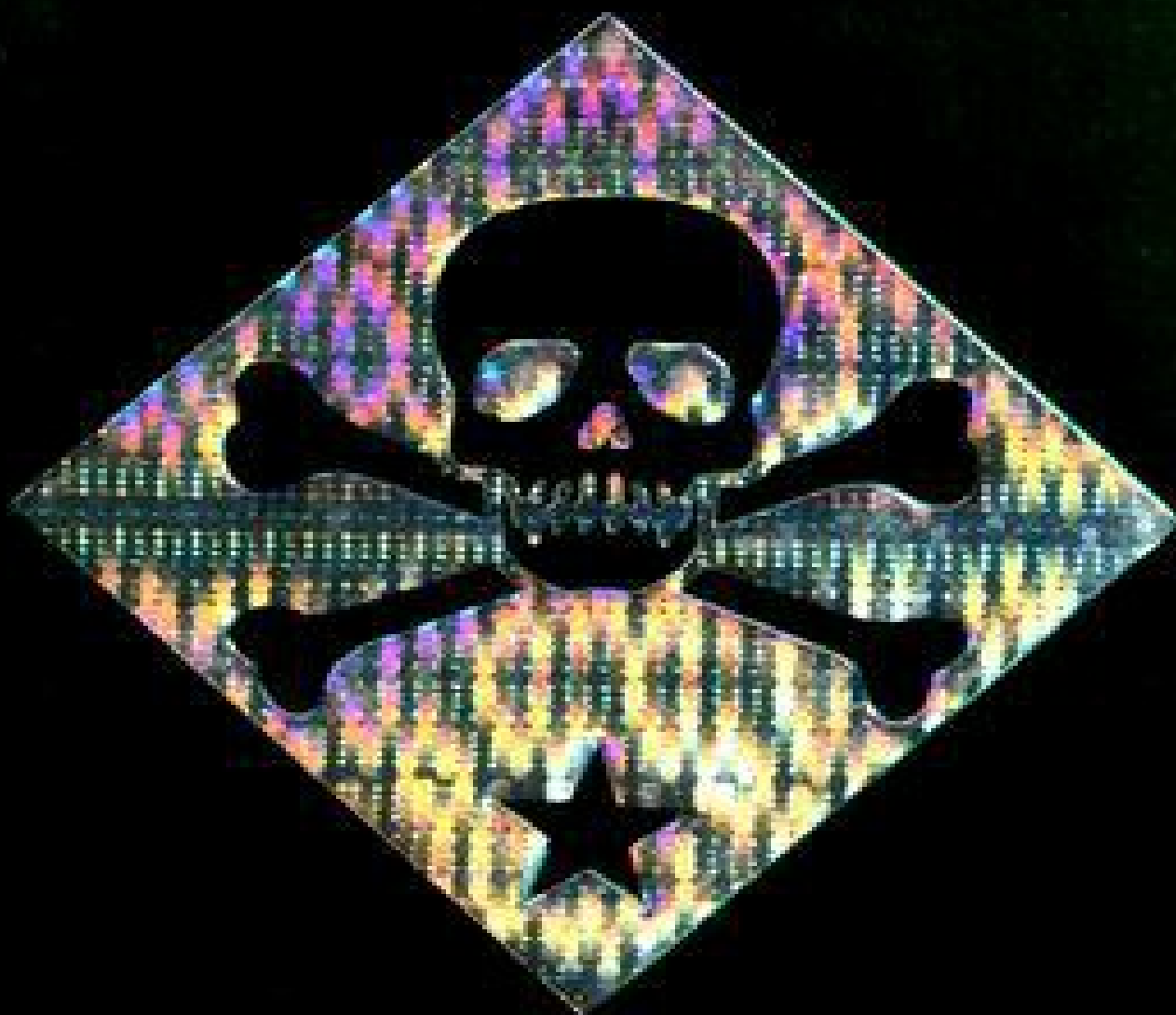
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ALEX RIDER



SKELETON KEY

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

New York Times *best-selling author*

Skeleton Key

Alex Rider [3]

Anthony Horowitz

Puffin (2011)

Young adult fiction, Tennis, Sports Recreation, Fiction, Political Science, Terrorism, Europe, Law Crime, Political Freedom Security, Miscellaneous, Spies, Rider; Alex (Fictitious character), Orphans, Juvenile Fiction, Mysteries Detective Stories, Orphans Foster Homes, People Places, Spies - Great Britain, England, Family, Action Adventure, General, Tennis stories, Spy stories

Tags:

From School Library Journal

Grade 5-10-Fans of Horowitz's *Stormbreaker* (2001) and *Point Blank* (2002, both Philomel), and newcomers to the series alike, will not be disappointed with this rip-roaring escapade featuring the 14-year-old spy. Trying to return to a "normal" life as a schoolboy after a mere four weeks since his last MI6 adventure, Alex Rider is recruited right off the soccer field to check out some suspicious goings-on at Wimbledon. This assignment catapults him into a series of life-threatening episodes, such as coming face to face with a great white shark, dodging bullets as he dives off a burning boat, and being tied to a conveyor belt that is moving toward the jaws of a gigantic grindstone in an abandoned sugar factory. Soon the teen is single-handedly taking on his most dangerous enterprise yet. His mission is nothing short of saving the world from a nuclear attack, engineered by the psychopathic and egomaniacal former commander of the Russian army. Alex is armed only with a few specially designed gadgets, which are disarmingly age-appropriate: a Gameboy that doubles as a Geiger counter, a cell phone whose aerial shoots out a drugged needle that is activated by pressing 999, a Tiger Woods figurine that doubles as a small grenade when its head is twisted just so. This page-turning thriller leaves readers breathless with anticipation. When at last Alex returns home, his love interest, Sabina Pleasure, asks where he has been. "Well, I was, sort of- busy," he replies in a classic, understated, James Bond kind of way.

Elizabeth Fernandez, Brunswick Middle School, Greenwich, CT

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From

Gr. 6-9. Fourteen-year-old British secret agent Alex Rider, last heard from in *Point Blank* (2002), is back in another adventure. This time he's on an island near Cuba where he's up against a retired Russian general who plans to set off a nuclear device and, in the ensuing world chaos, take over the Russian government and restore the Soviet Empire. The general takes a shine to Alex once they meet, however, and he offers to adopt him as his son. Of course, this is the man's fatal mistake; Alex is there at the crucial moment to thwart the general's plans. This series unabashedly lifts details from the James Bond formula (minus the vodka martinis and casual sex) and transfers them to a novel for young adults. Yet, the Bond formula is the most successful in entertainment history, and there's no doubting the appeal of this action-packed spy novel. *Todd Morning*
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IN THE DARK

Night came quickly to Skeleton Key.

The sun hovered briefly on the horizon, then dipped below. At once, the clouds rolled in—first red, then mauve, silver, green and black as if all the colours in the world were being sucked into a vast melting pot. A single frigate bird soared over the mangroves, its own colours lost in the chaos behind it. The air was close. Rain hung waiting. There was going to be a storm.

The single engine Cessna Skyhawk SP circled twice before coming in to land. It was the sort of plane that would barely have been noticed, flying in this part of the world. That was why it had been chosen. If anyone had been curious enough to check the registration number printed under the wing, they would have learned that this plane belonged to a photographic company based in Jamaica. This was not true. There was no company and it was already too dark to take photographs.

There were three men in the aircraft. They were all dark skinned, wearing faded jeans and loose, open-neck shirts. The pilot had long black hair, deep brown eyes and a thin scar running down the side of his face. He had met his two passengers only that afternoon. They had introduced themselves as Carlo and Marc but he doubted these were their real names. He knew that their journey had begun a long time ago, somewhere in Eastern Europe. He knew that this short flight was the last leg. He knew what they were carrying. Already, he knew too much.

The pilot glanced down at the multifunction display in the control panel. The illuminated computer screen was warning him of the storm that was closing in. That didn't worry him. Low clouds and rain gave him cover. The authorities were less vigilant during a storm. Even so, he was nervous. He had flown into Cuba many times, but never here. And tonight he would have preferred to have been going almost anywhere else.

Cayo Esqueleto. Skeleton Key.

There it was, stretching out before him, thirty-eight kilometres long and nine kilometres across at its widest point. The sea around it, which had been an extraordinary, brilliant blue until a few minutes ago, had suddenly darkened, as if someone had thrown a switch. Over to the west, he could make out the twinkling lights of Puerto Madre, the island's second biggest town. The main airport was further north, outside the capital of Santiago. But that wasn't where he was heading.

He pressed on the joystick and the plane veered to the right, circling over the forests and mangrove swamps that surrounded the old, abandoned airport at the bottom end of the island.

The Cessna had been equipped with a thermal intensifier, similar to the sort used in American spy satellites. He flicked a switch and glanced at the display. A few birds appeared as tiny pinpricks of red. There were more dots pulsating in the swamp. Crocodiles or perhaps manatees.

And a single dot about twenty metres from the runway. He turned to speak to the man called Carlo but there was no need. Carlo was already leaning over his shoulder, staring at the screen.

Carlo nodded. There was only one man waiting for them, as agreed. Anyone hiding within a few hundred metres of the airstrip would have shown up. It was safe to land.

The pilot looked out of the window and there was the runway. It was a rough strip of land on the edge of the coast, hacked out of the jungle and running parallel with the sea. The pilot would have missed it altogether in the dying light but for the two lines of electric bulbs burning at ground level, outlining the path for the plane.

The Cessna swooped out of the sky. At the last minute it was buffeted about by a sudden, damp squall that had been sent to try the pilot's nerve. The pilot didn't blink and a moment later the wheels hit the ground and the plane was bouncing and shuddering along, dead centre between the two rows of lights. He was grateful they were there. The mangroves—thick bushes, half-floating on pools of stagnant water—came almost to the edge of the runway. Go even a couple of metres in the wrong direction and a wheel might snag. It would be enough to destroy the plane.

The pilot flicked switches. The engine died and the twin-bladed propellers slowed down and came to a halt. He looked out of the window. There was a jeep parked next to one of the buildings and it was here that the single man—the red dot on his screen—was waiting. He turned to his passengers.

"He's there."

The older of the two men nodded. Carlo was about thirty years old with black, curly hair. He hadn't shaved. Stubble the colour of cigarette ash clung to his jaw. He turned to the other passenger. "Marc? Are you ready?"

The man who called himself Marc could have been Carlo's younger brother. He was barely twenty-five and although he was trying not to show it, he was scared. There was sweat on the side of his face, glowing green as it caught the light from the control panel. He reached behind him and took out a gun, a German-built 10mm Glock automatic. He checked it was loaded, then slipped it into the waistband at the back of his trousers, under his shirt.

"I'm ready," he said.

"There is only him. There are two of us." Carlo tried to reassure Marc. Or perhaps he was trying to reassure himself. "We're both armed. There is nothing he can do."

"Then let's go."

Carlo turned to the pilot. "Have the plane ready," he commanded. "When we walk back, I will give you a sign." He raised a hand, one finger and thumb forming an O. "That is the signal that our business has been successfully concluded. Start the engine at that time. We don't want to stay here one second longer than we have to."

They got out of the plane. There was a thin layer of gravel on the runway which crunched beneath their combat boots as they walked round the side to the cargo door. They could feel the sullen heat in the air, the heaviness of the night sky. The island seemed to be holding its breath.

Carlo reached up and opened a door. In the back of the plane was a black container, about one metre by two. With difficulty, he and Marc lowered it to the ground.

The younger man looked up. The lights on the landing strip dazzled him but he could just make out a figure standing still as a statue beside the jeep, waiting for them to approach. He hadn't moved since the plane had landed. "Why doesn't he come to us?" he asked.

Carlo spat and said nothing.

There were two handles, one on either side of the container. The two men carried it between them, walking awkwardly, bending over their load. It took them a long time to reach the jeep.

But at last they were there. For a second time, they set the box down.

Carlo straightened up, rubbing his palms on the side of his jeans. "Good evening, General," he said. He was speaking in English. This was not his native language. Nor was it the general's. But it was the only language they had in common.

"Good evening." The general did not bother with names that he knew would be false anyway.

"You had no trouble getting here?"

"No trouble at all, General."

"You have it?"

"One kilogram of weapons grade uranium. Sufficient to build a bomb powerful enough to destroy a city. I would be interested to know which city you have in mind."

General Alexei Sarov took a step forward and the lights from the runway illuminated him. He was not a big man, yet there was something about him that radiated power and control. He still carried with him his years in the army. They could be seen in his close-cut, iron grey hair, his watchful pale blue eyes, his almost emotionless face. They were there in the very way he carried himself. He was perfectly poised; relaxed and wary at the same time. General Sarov was sixty-two years old but looked twenty years younger. He was dressed in a dark suit, a white shirt and a narrow dark blue tie. In the damp heat of the evening, his clothes should have been creased.

He should have been sweating. But to look at him, he could have just stepped out of an air-conditioned room.

He crouched down beside the container, at the same time producing a small device from his pocket. It looked like a car cigarette lighter with a dial attached. He found a socket in the side of the box and plugged the device in. Briefly, he examined the dial. He nodded. It was satisfactory.

"You have the rest of the money?" Carlo asked.

"Of course." The general straightened up and walked over to the jeep. Carlo and Marc tensed themselves—this was the moment when he might produce a gun. But when he turned round he was holding a black leather attaché-case. He flicked the locks and opened it. The case was filled with banknotes: one hundred dollar bills neatly banded together in packets of fifty. One hundred packets in all. A total of half a million dollars. More money than Carlo had ever seen in his life.

But still not enough.

"We've had a problem," Carlo said.

"Yes?" Sarov did not sound surprised.

Marc could feel the sweat as it drew a comma down the side of his neck. A mosquito was whining in his ear but he resisted the urge to slap it. This was what he had been waiting for. He was standing a few steps away, his hands hanging limply by his side. Slowly, he allowed them to creep behind him, closer to the concealed gun. He glanced at the ruined buildings. One might once have been a control tower. The other looked like a customs shed. Both of them were broken and empty, the brickwork crumbling, the windows smashed. Could there be someone hiding there? No. The thermal intensifier would have shown them. They were alone.

"The cost of the uranium." Carlo shrugged. "Our friend in Miami sends his apologies. But there are new security systems all over the world. Smuggling—particularly this sort of thing—has become much more difficult. And that's meant extra expense."

"How much extra expense?"

"A quarter of a million dollars."

"That's unfortunate."

"Unfortunate for you, General. You're the one who has to pay."

Sarov considered. "We had an agreement," he said.

There was a long silence. Marc's fingers reached out behind his back, closing around the Glock automatic. But then Sarov nodded. "I will have to raise the money," he said.

"You can have it transferred to the same account that we used before," Carlo said. "But I have to warn you, General. If the money hasn't arrived in three days, the American intelligence services will be told what has happened here tonight ... what you've just received. You may think you are safe here on this island. I can assure you, you won't be safe any more."

"You're threatening me," Sarov muttered. There was something at once calm and deadly in the way he spoke.

"It's nothing personal," Carlo said.

Marc produced a cloth bag. He unfolded it, then tipped the money out of the case and into the bag. The case might contain a radio transmitter. It might contain a small bomb. He left it behind.

“Good night, General,” Carlo said.

“Good night.” Sarov smiled. “I hope you enjoy the flight.”

The two men walked away. Marc could feel the money, the bundles pressing through the cloth against the side of his leg. “The man’s a fool,” he whispered, returning to his own language.

“An old man. Why were we afraid?”

“Let’s just get out of here,” Carlo said. He was thinking about what the general had said: I hope you enjoy the flight. Had he been smiling when he said that?

He made the agreed signal, pressing his finger and thumb together. At once the Cessna’s engine started up.

General Sarov was still watching them. He hadn’t moved, but now his hand reached once again into his jacket pocket. His fingers closed around the radio transmitter waiting there. He had wondered if it would be necessary to kill the two men and their pilot. Personally, he would have preferred not to, even as an insurance policy. But their demands had made it necessary. He should have known they would be greedy. Given the sort of people they were, it was almost inevitable.

Back in the plane, the two men were strapping themselves into their seats while the pilot prepared for take-off. Carlo heard the engine rev up as the plane slowly began to turn. Far away, there was a low rumble of thunder. Now he wished that they had turned the plane round immediately after they had landed. It would have saved some precious seconds and he was eager to be away.

Back in the air.

I hope you enjoy the flight.

There had been no emotion whatsoever in the general’s voice. He could have meant what he was saying. But Carlo guessed he would have spoken exactly the same way if he had been passing a sentence of death.

Next to him, Marc was already counting the money, running his hands through the piles of notes.

He looked back at the ruined buildings, at the waiting jeep. Would Sarov try something? What sort of resources did he have on the island? But as the plane turned in a tight circle, nothing moved. The general stayed where he was. There was nobody else in sight.

The runway lights went out.

“What the...?” The pilot swore viciously.

Marc stopped his counting. Carlo understood at once what was happening. “He’s turned the lights off,” he said. “He wants to keep us here. Can you take off without them?”

The plane had turned a half-circle so that it was facing the way it had come. The pilot stared out through the cockpit window, straining to see into the night. It was very dark now, but there was an ugly, unnatural light pulsating in the sky. He nodded. “It won’t be easy, but...”

The lights came back on again.

There they were, stretching into the distance, an arrow that pointed to freedom and an extra profit of a quarter of a million dollars. The pilot relaxed. “It must have been the storm,” he said. “It disrupted the electricity supply.”

“Just get us out of here,” Carlo muttered. “The sooner we’re in the air, the happier I’ll be.”

The pilot nodded. “Whatever you say.” He pressed down on the controls and the Cessna lumbered forward, picking up speed quickly. The runway lights blurred, guiding him forward.

Carlo settled back into his seat. Marc was watching out of the window.

And then, seconds before the wheels left the ground, the plane suddenly lurched. The whole world twisted as a giant, invisible hand seized hold of it and wrenched it sideways. The Cessna had been travelling at one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. It came to a grinding halt in a matter of seconds, the deceleration throwing all three men forward in their seats. If they hadn’t been belted in, they would have been hurled out of the front window—or what was left of the shattered glass. At the same time there was a series of ear-shattering crashes as something whipped into the fuselage. One of the wings had dipped down and the propeller was torn off, spinning into the night. Suddenly the plane was still, resting tilted on one side.

For a moment, nobody moved inside the cabin. The plane’s engines rattled and stopped. Then Marc pulled himself up in his seat. “What happened?” he screamed. “What happened?” He had bitten his tongue. Blood trickled down his chin. The bag was still open and money had spilled into his lap.

“I don’t understand...” The pilot was too dazed to speak.

“You left the runway!” Carlo’s face was twisted with shock and anger.

“I didn’t!”

“There!” Marc was pointing at something and Carlo followed his quivering finger. The door on the underside of the plane had buckled. Black water was seeping in underneath, forming a pool around their feet.

There was another rumble of thunder, closer this time.

“He did this!” the pilot said.

“What did he do?” Carlo demanded.

“He moved the runway!”

It had been a simple trick. As the plane had turned, Sarov had switched off the lights on the runway using the radio transmitter in his pocket. For a moment, the pilot had been disoriented, lost in the darkness. Then the plane had finished its turn and the lights had come back on. But what he hadn't known, what he wouldn't have been able to see, was that it was a second set of lights that had been activated—and that these ran off at an angle, leaving the safety of the runway and continuing over the surface of the swamp.

"He led us into the mangroves," the pilot said.

Now Carlo understood what had happened to the plane. The moment its wheels touched the water, its fate had been sealed. Without solid ground beneath it, the plane had become bogged down and toppled over. Swamp water was even now pouring in as they slowly sank beneath the surface. The branches of the mangrove trees that had almost torn the plane apart surrounded them, bars of a living prison.

"What are we going to do?" Marc demanded, and suddenly he was sounding like a child. "We're going to drown!"

"We can get out!" Carlo had suffered whiplash injuries in the collision. He moved one arm painfully, unfastening his seat-belt.

"We shouldn't have tried to cheat him!" Marc cried. "You knew what he was. You were told—"

"Shut up!" Carlo had a gun of his own. He pulled it out of the holster underneath his shirt and balanced it on his knee. "We'll get out of here and we'll deal with him. And then somehow we'll find a way off this damn island."

"There's something..." the pilot began.

Something had moved outside.

"What is it?" Marc whispered.

"Shhh!" Carlo half stood up, his body filling the cramped space of the cabin. The plane tilted again, settling further into the swamp. He lost his balance then steadied himself. He reached out, past the pilot, as if he was going to climb out of the broken front window.

Something huge and horrible lunged towards him, blocking out what little light there was in the night sky. Carlo screamed as it threw itself head first into the plane and onto him. There was a glint of white and a dreadful grunting sound. The other men were screaming too.

General Sarov stood watching. It wasn't raining yet but the water was heavy in the air. There was a flash of lightning that seemed to cross the sky almost in slow motion, relishing its journey.

In that moment, he saw the Cessna on its side, half-buried in the swamp. There were now half a dozen crocodiles swarming all over it. The largest of them had dived head first into the cockpit.

Only its tail was visible, thrashing about as it gorged itself.

He reached down and lifted up the black container. Although it had taken two men to carry it to him, it seemed to weigh nothing in his hands. He placed it in the jeep, then stood back. He allowed himself the rare privilege of a smile and felt it, briefly, on his lips. Tomorrow, when the crocodiles had finished their meal, he would send in his field workers—the macheteros—to recover the banknotes. Not that the money was important. He was the owner of one kilogram of weapons grade uranium. As Carlo had said, he now had the power to destroy a small city.

But Sarov had no intention of destroying a city.

His target was the entire world.

MATCH POINT

Alex caught the ball on the top of his chest, bounced it forward and kicked it into the back of the net. It was then that he noticed the man with the large white dog. It was a warm, bright Friday afternoon, the weather caught between late spring and early summer. This was only a practise match but Alex took the game seriously. Mr. Wiseman, who taught PE, had selected him for the first team and he was looking forward to playing against other schools in west London.

Unfortunately, his school, Brookland, didn't have its own playing fields. This was a public field and anyone could walk past. And they could bring their dogs. Alex recognized the man at once and his heart sank. At the same time he was angry. How could he have the nerve to come here, into the school arena, in the middle of a game? Weren't these people ever going to leave him alone?

The man's name was Crawley. With his thinning hair, blotchy face and old-fashioned clothes, he looked like a junior army officer or perhaps a teacher in a second-rate private school. But Alex knew the truth. Crawley belonged to MI6. Not exactly a spy, but someone who was very much a part of that world. Crawley was an office manager in one of the country's most secret offices. He did the paperwork, made the arrangements, set up the meetings. When someone died with a knife in their back or a bullet in their chest, it would be Crawley who had signed on the dotted line.

As Alex ran back to the centre line, Crawley walked over to a bench, dragging the dog behind.

The animal didn't seem to want to walk. It didn't want to be there at all. Crawley sat down. He was still sitting there ten minutes later when the final whistle blew and the game came to an end.

Alex considered for a moment. Then he picked up his jersey and went over to him.

Crawley seemed surprised to see him. "Alex!" he exclaimed. "What a surprise! I haven't seen you since ... well, since you got back from France."

It had only been four weeks since MI6 had forced Alex to investigate a school for the super-rich in south-east France. Using a false name, he had become a student at the Point Blanc Academy only to find himself taken prisoner by the mad headmaster, Dr Grief. He had been chased down a mountain, shot at and almost dissected alive in a biology class. Alex had never wanted to be a spy and the whole business had convinced him he was right. Crawley was the last person he wanted to see.

But the MI6 man was beaming. "Are you on the school team? Is this where you play? I'm surprised I haven't noticed you before. Barker and I often walk here."

"Barker?"

"The dog." Crawley reached out and patted it. "He's a Dalmatian."

"I thought Dalmatians had spots."

"Not this one." Crawley hesitated. "Actually, Alex, it's a bit of luck running into you. I wonder if I could have a word with you?"

Alex shook his head. "Forget it, Mr. Crawley. I told you the last time. I'm not interested in MI6.

I'm a schoolboy. I'm not a spy."

"Absolutely!" Crawley agreed. "This has got nothing to do with the ... um ... company. No, no, no." He looked almost embarrassed. "The thing is, what I wanted to ask you was ... how would you like a front row seat at Wimbledon?"

The question took Alex completely by surprise. "Wimbledon? You mean ... the tennis?"

"That's right." Crawley smiled. "The All England Tennis Club. I'm on the committee."

"And you're offering me a ticket?"

"Yes."

"What's the catch?"

"There is no catch, Alex. Not really. But... let me explain." Alex was aware that the other players were getting ready to leave. The school day was almost over. He listened as Crawley went on. "The thing is, you see, a week ago we had a break-in. Security at the club is always tight but someone managed to climb over the wall and get into the Millennium Building through a forced window."

"What's the Millennium Building?"

"It's where the players have their changing rooms. It's also got a gym, a restaurant, a couple of lounges and so on. We have closed circuit television cameras but the intruder disabled the system—along with the main alarm. It was a thoroughly professional job. We'd never have known anyone had been there except for a stroke of luck. One of our night guards saw the man leaving. He was Chinese, in his early twenties—"

"The guard?"

"The intruder. Dressed from head to foot in black with some sort of rucksack on his back. The guard alerted the police and we had the whole place searched. The Millennium Building, the courts, the cafes ... everywhere. It took three days. There are no terrorist cells active in London at the moment, thank goodness, but there was always a chance that some lunatic might have planted a bomb. We had the anti-terrorist squad in. Sniffer dogs. Nothing! Whoever it was had vanished into thin air and it seemed he'd left nothing behind.

"Now, here's the strange thing, Alex. He didn't leave anything, but nor did he take anything. In fact, nothing seems to have been touched. As I say, if the guard hadn't seen this chap, we'd never have known he had been there. What do you make of that?"

Alex shrugged. "Maybe the guard disturbed him before he could get his hands on whatever it was he wanted."

"No. He was already leaving when he was seen."

"Could the guard have imagined it?"

"We examined the cameras. The film is time-coded and we discovered that they had definitely been out of action for two hours. From midnight until two in the morning."

"Then what do you think, Mr. Crawley? Why are you telling me this?"

Crawley sighed and stretched his legs. He was wearing suede shoes, shabby and down at heel.

The dog had fallen asleep. "My belief is that somebody is intending to sabotage Wimbledon this year," he said. Alex was about to interrupt but Crawley held up a hand. "I know it sounds ridiculous and I have to admit, the other committee members don't believe me. On the other hand, they don't have my instincts. They don't work in the same business as me. But think about it, Alex. There had to be a reason for such a carefully planned and executed break-in. But there is no reason. Something's wrong."

"Why would anyone want to sabotage Wimbledon?"

"I don't know. But you have to remember, the Wimbledon tennis fortnight is a huge business.

There are millions of pounds at stake. Prize money alone adds up to eight and a half million. And then there are television rights, merchandising rights, corporate sponsorship... We get VIPs flying in from all over the planet—everyone from film stars to presidents—and tickets for the men's final have been known to change hands for literally thousands of pounds. It's not just a game. It's a world event, and if anything happened ... well, it doesn't bear thinking about."

Crawley obviously had been thinking about it. He looked tired. The worry was deep in his eyes.

Alex thought for a moment. "You want me to look around." He smiled. "I've never been to Wimbledon. I've only ever seen it on TV. I'd love a ticket for Centre Court. But I don't see how a one-day visit would actually help."

"Exactly, Alex. But a one-day visit isn't quite what I had in mind."

"Go on."

"Well, you see, I was wondering if you would consider becoming a ballboy."

"You're not serious?"

"Why not? You can stay there for the whole fortnight. You'll have a wonderful time and you'll be right in the middle of things. You'll see some great matches. And I'll be able to relax a little, knowing you're there. If anything is going on, there's a good chance you might spot it. Then you can call me and I'll take care of it." He nodded. It was obvious that he had managed to persuade himself, if not Alex. "It's not as if this is dangerous or anything. I mean ... it's Wimbledon.

There'll be plenty of other boys and girls there. What do you think?"

"Don't you have enough security people already?"

"Of course we have a security company. They're easy to see—which makes them easy to avoid.

But you'd be invisible, Alex. That's the whole point."

"Alex...?"

It was Mr. Wiseman who had called out to him. The teacher was waiting for him. All the other players had left now, apart from two or three boys kicking the ball amongst themselves.

"I'll just be a minute, sir," Alex called back.

The teacher hesitated. It was rather strange, one of the boys talking to this man in his old-fashioned blazer and striped tie. But on the other hand, this was Alex Rider and the whole school knew there was something odd about him. He had been away from school twice recently, both times without any proper explanation, and the last time he had turned up again, the whole science block had been destroyed in a mysterious fire. Mr. Wiseman decided to ignore the situation. Alex could look after himself and he would doubtless turn up later. He hoped.

"Don't be too long!" he said.

He walked off and Alex found himself left on his own with Crawley.

He considered what he had just been told. Part of him mistrusted Crawley. Was it just a coincidence, his coming upon Alex on a playing field in the middle of a game? Unlikely. In the world of MI6, where everything was planned and calculated, there were no coincidences. It was one of the reasons why Alex hated it. They had used him twice now, and both times they hadn't really cared if he had lived or died, as long as he was useful to them. Crawley was part of that world and in his heart Alex disliked him as much as the rest of it.

But at the same time, he told himself, he might be reading too much into this. Crawley wasn't asking him to infiltrate a foreign embassy or parachute into Iraq or anything remotely dangerous.

He was being offered two weeks at Wimbledon. It was as simple as that. A chance to watch some tennis and—if he was unlucky—spot someone trying to get their hands on the club silver.

What could possibly go wrong?

"All right, Mr. Crawley," he said. "I don't see why not."

"That's wonderful, Alex. I'll make the arrangements. Come on, Barker!"

Alex glanced at the dog and noticed that he had just woken up. He was staring at him with pink, bloodshot eyes. Warning him? Did the dog know something he didn't?

But then Crawley jerked on the leash and before the dog could give away any of its master's secrets, it was quickly pulled away.

Six weeks later, Alex found himself on Centre Court, dressed in the dark green and mauve colours of the All England Tennis Club. What must surely be the final game in this qualifying round was about to begin. One of the two players sitting just centimetres away from him would go forward to the next round with a chance of winning the half a million pounds prize money that went with the winner's trophy. The other would be on the next bus home. It was only now, as he knelt beside the net and waited for the serve, that Alex really understood the power of Wimbledon and why it had won its place on the world calendar. There was simply no competition like it.

He was surrounded by the great bulk of the stadium, with thousands and thousands of spectators rising ever higher until they disappeared into the shadows at the very top. It was hard to make out any of the faces. There were too many of them and they seemed too far away. But he felt the thrill of the crowd as the players walked to their ends of the court, the perfectly striped grass seeming to glow beneath their feet. There was a clatter of applause, echoing upwards, and then a sudden stillness. Photographers hung, vulture-like, over huge telephoto lenses while beneath them, in green-covered bunkers, television cameras swung round to take in the first serve. The players faced each other: two men whose whole lives had led up to this moment and whose future in the game would be decided in the next few minutes. It was all so very English—the grass, the strawberries, the straw hats. And yet it was still bloody, a gladiatorial contest like no other. "Quiet please, ladies and gentlemen..." The umpire's voice rang out through the various speakers and then the first player served. Jacques Lefevre was French, twenty-two years old and new to the tournament. Nobody had expected him to get this far. He was playing a German, Jamie Blitz, one of the favourites in this year's competition. But it was Blitz who was losing—

two sets down, five games to two. Alex watched him as he waited, balancing on the balls of his feet. Lefevre served. The ball thundered close to the centre line. An ace.

"Fifteen love."

Alex was close enough to see defeat in the German's eyes. This was the cruelty of the game; the psychology of it. Lose your mental edge and you could lose everything. That was what had happened to Blitz now. Alex could almost smell it in his sweat. As he walked to the other side of the court to face the next serve, his whole body looked heavy, as if it was taking all his strength just to keep himself there. He lost the next point and the one after. Alex sprinted across the court, snatched up a ball and just had time to roll it up to the ballboy at left base one. Not that it would be needed. It looked as if there would be only one more serve in the game.

And sure enough, Lefevre managed a final ace, falling to his knees, fists clenched in triumph. It was a pose seen hundreds of times before on the courts of Wimbledon and the audience duly rose to its feet, applauding. But it hadn't been a good match. Blitz should have won. Certainly the game shouldn't have ended in three straight sets. He had been terribly off form and the young Frenchman had walked all over him.

Alex collected the last of the balls and sent them rolling up to the far corner. He stood to attention while the players shook hands, first with each other, then with the umpire. Blitz walked towards him and started packing up his sports bag. Alex studied his face. The German looked dazed, as if he couldn't quite believe he had lost. Then he picked up his things and walked away.

He gave one last salute to the audience and walked off the court. Lefevre was still signing autographs for the front row. Blitz had already been forgotten.

"It was a really bad game," Alex said. "I don't know what was wrong with Blitz. He seemed to be sleepwalking half the time."

It was an hour later and Alex was sitting at a table in the Complex, the set of rooms underneath the umpire's office at the corner of Number One Court where the two hundred boys and girls who work throughout the tournament have their meals, get changed and relax. He was having a drink with two other ballboys and a ballgirl. He had become good friends with the girl in the last couple of weeks—so much so that she'd invited him to join her and her family when they went down to Cornwall after Wimbledon finished. She was dark-haired, with bright blue eyes and freckles. She was also a fast runner and very fit. She went to a convent school in Wimbledon and her father was a journalist working in business and current affairs, but there was nothing remotely serious about her. She loved jokes, the ruder the better, and Alex was sure that her laughter could be heard as far away as Court Nineteen. Her name was Sabina Pleasure.

"It's too bad," Sabina said. "But I like Lefevre. He's cute. And he's only a bit older than me."

"Seven years," Alex reminded her.

"That's nothing these days. Anyway, I'll be back on Centre Court tomorrow. It's going to be hard to keep my eye on the game."

Alex smiled. He really liked Sabina, even if she did seem to have a fixation with older men. He was glad now that he had accepted Crawley's offer. "Just make sure you keep your hands on the right balls," he said.

"Rider!" The voice cut through the general chat in the cafeteria and a small, tough-looking man came striding out of a side office. This was Wally Walfor, the ex-RAF sergeant responsible for the ballboys and girls.

"Yes, sir?" Alex had spent four weeks training with Walfor and he had decided that the man was less of a monster than he pretended to be.

"I need someone for standby. Do you mind?"

"No, sir. That's fine." Alex drained his drink and stood up. He was glad that Sabina looked sorry to see him go.

Standby involved waiting outside the umpire's office in case he was needed on one of the courts or anywhere inside the grounds. In fact, Alex would enjoy sitting outside in the sun, watching the crowds. He took his tray back to the counter and was about to leave when he noticed something that made him stop and think.

There was a security guard talking on a public telephone in the corner of the room. There was nothing strange about that. There were always guards posted on the entrance to the Complex and they occasionally slipped down for a glass of water, or perhaps to use the toilet. The guard was talking quickly and excitedly, his eyes shining, as if he was passing on important news. It was impossible to hear what he was saying in the general hubbub

of the cafeteria, but even so Alex sidled a little closer in the hope of picking up a few words. And that was when he noticed the tattoo. With so many ballboys and girls in the room and with the cooks busy behind the counter, the temperature had risen. The guard had taken off his jacket. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. And there, on his arm, just where the material ended, was a large red circle. Alex had never seen anything quite like it. A plain, undecorated circle with no writing, no sign of a picture. What could it mean?

The guard suddenly turned and saw Alex looking at him. It had happened very quickly and Alex was annoyed with himself for not taking more care. The guard didn't stop talking but he shifted his body so that the arm with the tattoo was away from Alex's view. At the same time, he covered the tattoo with his free hand. Alex smiled at him and gestured, as if he was waiting for the phone. The guard muttered a few more words and hung up. Then he put his jacket back on and moved away. Alex waited until he had gone back upstairs, then followed him. The guard had disappeared. Alex took his place on the bench outside the umpire's office and considered.

A telephone conversation in a crowded cafeteria. It shouldn't have meant anything. But the strange thing was, Alex had seen the guard a short while before, about an hour before the Blitz/Lefevre game had begun. Alex had been sent over to the Millennium Building to deliver a racquet to one of the other competitors and had been directed to the players' lounge. Climbing the staircase that swept up from the main reception, he had found himself in a large, open area with television monitors on one side and computer terminals on the other, and bright red and blue sofas in between. He knew he was privileged to be there. This was a private place. Venus Williams was sitting on one of the sofas. Tim Henman was watching a game on TV. And there was Jamie Blitz himself, getting a plastic cup of iced mineral water from the dispenser against the far wall.

The guard had also been there. Alex had noticed him standing rather awkwardly near the stairs.

He was watching Blitz, but at the same time he was using a mobile phone. At least, that was what it looked like. But Alex had thought at the time that there was something strange about him.

Although the mobile was at his ear, he wasn't actually talking. All his attention was on Blitz.

Alex had watched as Blitz drank his water and walked away. The guard had walked off a few seconds later.

What had he been doing inside the Millennium building? That was the first question Alex asked himself now as he sat in the sunshine, listening to the thwack of distant tennis balls and the applause of an unseen crowd. And there was something else, more puzzling. If the guard had a mobile phone, and if that phone had been working just a few hours ago, why had he needed to make a call from the public telephone in the corner of the Complex? Of course, his battery could have gone down. But even so, why use that particular phone? There were telephones all over the club, up on the surface. Could it be that he didn't want to be seen? And why did he have a red circle tattooed on his arm? He hadn't wanted that to be seen. Alex was certain he had tried to cover it up. And there was something else. Maybe it was just coincidence, but the guard, just like the man who had broken into the All England Tennis Club to begin with, was Chinese.

BLOOD AND STRAWBERRIES

Alex didn't make a conscious decision to follow the guard, but over the next few days he seemed drawn to him almost as if by accident. He spotted him twice more; once searching handbags at gate five and again giving directions to a couple of spectators.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to keep track of him all the time. That was the one flaw in Crawley's plan. Alex's job as a ballboy kept him on Centre Court throughout much of the day.

The ballboys and girls worked a rotation system, two hours on, two hours off. At best, he could only be a part-time spy. And when he was actually on court, he quickly forgot the guard, the telephone and the entire business of the break-in as he found himself absorbed by the drama of the game.

But two days after Blitz had left Wimbledon, Alex found himself once again shadowing the guard. It was about half an hour before afternoon play was due to begin and Alex was about to report into the Complex when he saw him entering the Millennium Building again. That was strange in itself. The building had its own security staff. The public couldn't get past the reception desk without a pass. So what was he doing inside? Alex glanced at his watch. If he was late, Walford would yell at him and possibly even move him to one of the less interesting perimeter courts. But there was still time. And he had to admit, his curiosity was aroused.

He went into the Millennium Building. As usual, nobody questioned him. His ballboy uniform was enough. He climbed the stairs, passed through the players' lounge and into the restaurant at the other side. The guard was there, ahead of him. Once again he had his mobile phone in his hand. But he wasn't making a call. He was simply standing, watching the players and the journalists as they finished their lunch.

The dining room was large and modern, with a long buffet for hot food and a central area with salads, cold drinks and fruit. There must have been about a hundred people eating at the tables and Alex recognized one or two famous faces among them. He glanced at the guard. He was standing in a corner, trying not to be noticed. At the same time, his attention seemed to be fixed on a table next to one of the windows. Alex followed the direction of his gaze. There were two men sitting at the table. One was wearing a jacket and tie. The other was in a tracksuit. Alex didn't know the first man but the second was Owen Bryant, another world-class player, an American. He would be playing later that afternoon.

The other man could have been his manager, or perhaps his agent. The two of them were talking, quietly, intensely. The manager spoke and Bryant laughed. Alex moved further into the restaurant, keeping close to the wall. He wanted to see what the guard was going to do, but he didn't want to be seen. He was glad that the restaurant was fairly crowded. There were enough people moving about to screen him.

Bryant stood up. Alex saw the guard's eyes narrow. Now the mobile phone was on its way to his ear. But he hadn't dialled a number. Bryant went over to a water dispenser and pulled a cup out of the plastic cylinder. The guard pressed a button on his phone. Bryant helped himself to some water. Alex watched as a bubble of air mushroomed up to the surface inside the plastic tank. The tennis player carried the water back to the table and sat down. The manager said something.

Bryant drank his water. And that was it.

Alex had seen the whole thing.

But what had he seen?

He had no time to answer the question. The guard was already moving, heading for the exit. Alex came to a decision. The main door was between himself and the guard and now he made for it too, keeping his head low as if he wasn't looking where he was going. He timed it perfectly. Just as the guard reached the door, Alex crashed into him. At the same moment, he swung an arm carelessly, knocking the guard's hand. The mobile phone fell to the floor.

"Oh—I'm sorry," Alex said. Before the guard could stop him, he had leant down and picked up the phone. He weighed it in his hand for a moment before passing it back. "Here you are," he said.

The guard said nothing. For a moment his eyes were locked into Alex's and Alex found himself being inspected by two very black pupils that had no life at all. The man's skin was pale and pockmarked, with a sheen of sweat across his upper lip. There was no expression anywhere on his face. Alex felt the telephone being wrenched out of his hand and then the guard had gone, the door swinging shut behind him.

Alex's hand was still in mid-air. He looked down at his palm. He was worried that he had given himself away, but at least he had learned something from the exchange. The mobile phone was a fake. It was too light. There was nothing on the screen. And it had no recognizable logo: Nokia, Panasonic, Virgin ... nothing.

He turned back to the two men at the table. Bryant had finished his water and crumpled the plastic cup in his hand. He was shaking hands with his friend, about to leave.

The water...

Alex had had an idea that was completely absurd and yet made some sort of sense out of what he had seen. He walked back across the restaurant and crouched down beside the dispenser. He had seen the same machines all over the tennis club. He took a cup and used its rim to press the tap underneath the tank. Water, filtered and chilled, ran into the cup. He could feel it, ice cold against his palm.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Alex looked up to see a red-faced man in a Wimbledon blazer towering over him. It was the first unfriendly face he'd seen since he had arrived. "I was just getting some water," he explained.

"I can see that! That's obvious. I mean, what are you doing in this restaurant? This is reserved for players, officials and press."

"I know that," Alex said. He forced himself not to lose his temper. He had no right to be here and if the official—whoever he was—complained, he might well lose his place as a ballboy. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I brought a racquet over for Mr. Bryant. I delivered it just now. But I was thirsty, so I stopped to get a drink."

The official softened. Alex's story sounded perfectly reasonable. And he had enjoyed being addressed as "sir". He nodded. "All right. But I don't want to see you in here again." He reached out a hand and took the plastic cup. "Now on your way."

Alex arrived back at the Complex about ten minutes before play began. Walford glowered at him but said nothing. That afternoon, Owen Bryant lost his match against Jacques Lefevre, the same unknown Frenchman who had so unexpectedly beaten Jamie Blitz two days before. The final score was 6-4, 6-7, 4-6, 2-6. Although Bryant had won the first game, his play had steadily deteriorated throughout the afternoon. It was another surprising result. Like Blitz, Bryant had been a favourite to win.

Twenty minutes later, Alex was back in the basement restaurant, sitting with Sabina, who was drinking a Coke Lite.

"My mum and dad are here today," she was saying. "I managed to get them tickets and in return they've promised to get me a new surfboard. Have you ever surfed, Alex?"

"What?" Alex was miles away.

"I was talking about Cornwall. Surfing..."

"Yes, I've surfed." Alex had learned with his uncle, Ian Rider. The spy whose death had so abruptly changed Alex's life. The two of them had spent a week together in San Diego, California. That had been years ago. Years that sometimes felt like centuries.

"Is there something wrong with your drink?" Sabina asked.

Alex realized he was holding his Coke in front of him, balancing it in his hand, staring at it. But he was thinking about water.

"No, it's fine..." he began.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the guard. He had come back downstairs into the Complex. Once again he was using the telephone in the corner. Alex saw him put in a coin and dial a number.

"I'll be right back," he said.

He got up and made his way over to the phone.

The guard was standing with his back to him. This time he might be able to get close enough to hear what was being said, "...will be completely successful." The guard was talking in English but with a thick accent. He still had his back to Alex. There was a pause. Then: "I'm going to meet him now. Yes ... straight away. He'll give it to me and I'll bring it to you." Another pause.

Alex got the feeling that the conversation was coming to an end. He took a few steps back. "I have to go," the guard said. "Bye." He put the receiver down and walked "Alex...?" Sabina called to him. She was on her own, sitting where he had left her. He realized she must have been watching what he did. He raised a hand and waved to her. He would have to find some way to explain all this later.

The guard didn't climb back up to the surface. Instead he took a door which led to a long corridor, stretching into the distance. Alex opened the door and followed.

The All England Tennis Club covers a huge area. On the surface it looks a bit like a theme park, though one whose only theme is tennis. Thousands of people stream along paths and covered walkways, an uninterrupted flow of brilliant white shirts, sunglasses and straw hats. As well as the courts, there are tearooms and cafes, restaurants, shops, hospitality tents, ticket booths and security points.

But there is a second, less well-known world underneath all this. The entire club is connected by an underground maze of corridors, tunnels and roads, some big enough to drive a car through. If it's easy to get lost above ground, it's even easier to lose yourself below. There are very few signs and there's nobody standing at the corner to offer you information. This is the world of the cooks and the waiters, the refuse collectors and the delivery men. Somehow they find their way around, coming up in the daylight exactly where they are needed before disappearing again.

The corridor in which Alex found himself was called the Royal Route and connected the Millennium Building with Court Number One, allowing the players to make their way to the game without being seen. It was clean and empty, with a bright blue carpet. The guard was about twenty metres ahead of him and it felt eerie to be so suddenly alone. There were just the two of them there. Above them, on the surface, there would be people everywhere, milling about in the sunlight. Alex was grateful for the carpet, which muffled the sound of his feet. It seemed that the guard was in a hurry. So far he hadn't stopped or turned round. The guard reached a wooden door marked RESTRICTED. Without stopping, he went through. Alex paused for a moment, then followed. Now he found himself in an altogether grimmer environment, a cement corridor with yellow industrial markings and fat ventilation pipes overhead. The air smelled of oil and garbage, and Alex knew that he had arrived at the so-called Buggy Route, a supply lane that forms a great circle underneath the club. A couple of teenagers in green aprons and jeans walked past him, pushing two plastic bins. A waitress went the other way, carrying a tray of dirty plates.

There was no sign of the guard and for a moment Alex thought he'd lost him. But then he saw a figure disappearing behind a series of translucent plastic strips that hung from the ceiling to the floor. He could just make out the man's uniform on the other side of the barrier. He hurried forward and went through. Alex realized two things at the same moment. He no longer had any idea where he was—and he was there on his own.

He was in an underground chamber, banana-shaped, curving round, with concrete pillars supporting the roof. It looked like an underground carpark and there were indeed three or four cars parked in bays next to the raised walkway where he was standing now. But most of the space was taken up by trash. There were empty cardboard boxes, wooden pallets, a rusting cement mixer, bits of old fencing and broken down coffee vending machines, thrown out and left to rot on the damp cement floor. The air smelled bad and Alex could hear a constant whine, like an electric saw, coming from a garbage compactor just out of his sight. And yet the area was also used for the storage of food and drink. There were beer barrels, hundreds of bottles of fizzy drinks, gas cylinders and, clustered together, eight or nine massive white boxes—refrigerators, each one carrying the label RAWLINGS REFRIGERATION.

Alex looked up at the roof. It was slanting upwards and the shape reminded him of something.

Of course! The raked seating around Court Number One! That was where he was—in the loading bay beneath the tennis court. This was the underbelly of Wimbledon all right. This was where all the supplies arrived and where all the trash Left. And right now, ten thousand people were

sitting just a few metres above his head, enjoying the game, unaware that everything they consumed throughout the day began and ended here.

But where was the guard? Why had he come here and who was he going to meet? Alex crept forward carefully, once again feeling very alone. He was on a raised platform with the single word DANGER repeated in yellow letters along its edge. He didn't need to be told. He came to a flight of steps and went down, moving into the main body of the chamber, on the same level as the refrigerators. He walked past a stack of gas cylinders, pressurized carbon dioxide. He had no idea what they were for. Half the things down here seemed to have been dumped for no good reason.

He was fairly sure now that the guard had gone. Why would he want to meet anyone down here?

For the first time since he had left the Complex, Alex played back the telephone conversation in his mind.

"I'm going to meet him now. Yes ... straight away. He'll give it to me..."

It sounded ridiculous, fake, like something out of a bad film. Even as Alex realized this and knew that he had been tricked, he heard the screaming sound, saw the dark shape rushing out of the shadows. He was in the middle of the concrete floor, out in the open. The guard was behind the wheel of a fork-lift truck, the metal prongs jutting out towards him like the horns of an enormous bull. Powered by its forty-eight volt electric engine, the truck was speeding towards him on pneumatic tyres. Alex glanced up and saw the heavy wooden pallets, a dozen of them, balanced high above the cabin. He saw the guard's smile, a gleam of ugly teeth in an uglier face.

The truck covered the distance between them with astonishing speed then came to a sudden halt as the guard slammed on the brake. Alex yelled and threw himself to one side. The wooden pallets, carried forward by the truck's momentum, slid off the forks and came clattering down.

Alex should have been crushed, would have been, but for the beer barrels. A line of them had taken the weight of the pallets, leaving a tiny triangle of space. Alex heard the wood smashing centimetres above his head. Splinters rained down on his neck and back. Dust and dirt smothered him. But he was still alive. Choking and half blinded, he crawled forward as the fork-lift truck reversed and prepared to come after him again.

How could he have been so stupid? The guard had seen him that first time in the Complex, when he had made his telephone call. Alex had stood there, gaping at the tattoo on the man's arm and had thought that his ballboy uniform would be enough to protect him. And then, in the Millennium Building, Alex had clumsily knocked into him to get his hands on the mobile phone.

Of course the guard had known who he was and what he was doing. It didn't matter that he was a teenager. He was dangerous. He had to be taken out.

And so he had laid a trap so obvious that it wouldn't have fooled ... well, a schoolboy. Alex might want to think of himself as some sort of superspy who had twice saved the whole world, but that was nonsense. The guard had made a fake phone call and tricked Alex into following him into this desolate area. And now he was going to kill him. It wouldn't matter who he was or how much he had found out once he was dead.

Choking and sick, Alex staggered to his feet just as the fork-lift truck bore down on him a second time. He turned and ran. The guard looked almost ridiculous, hunched up in the tiny cabin. But the machine he was driving was fast, powerful and incredibly flexible, spinning a full circle on a ten pence piece. Alex tried changing direction, sprinting to one side. The truck spun round and followed. Could he make it back to the raised platform? No. Alex knew it was too far away.

Now the guard reached out and pressed a button. The metal forks shuddered and dropped down so that they were less like horns, more like the twin swords of some nightmare medieval knight.

Which way should he dive? Left or right? Alex just had time to make up his mind before the truck was on him. He dived to the right, rolling over and over on the concrete. The guard pulled the joystick and the machine spun round again. Alex twisted and the heavy wheels missed him by barely a centimetre, then crashed into one of the pillars. There was a pause. Alex got up, his head spinning. For a brief second, he hoped that the collision might have knocked the guard out, but with a sick feeling in his stomach he saw the man step out of the cabin, brushing a little dust off the arm of his jacket. He was moving with the slow confidence of a man who knew that he was in total command. And Alex could already see why. Automatically, the guard had taken the stance of a martial arts expert; feet slightly apart, centre of gravity low. His hands were curving in the air, waiting to strike. He was still smiling. All he could see was a defenceless boy—and one already weakened by two encounters with the fork-lift truck.

With a sudden cry, he lashed out, his right hand slicing towards Alex's throat. If the blow had made contact, Alex would have been killed. But at the last second he brought up both his fists, crossing his arms to form a block. The guard was taken by surprise and Alex took advantage of the moment to kick out with his right foot, aiming for the groin. But the guard was no longer there, having swivelled to one side, and in that moment Alex knew he was up against a fighter who was stronger, faster and more experienced than him and that he really didn't have a chance.

The guard swung round, and this time the back of his hand caught Alex on the side of his head.

Alex heard the crack. For a moment he was blinded. He reeled backwards, crashing into a metal surface. It was the door of one of the fridges. Somehow he caught hold of the handle and as he stumbled forward, the door opened. He felt a blast of cold across the back of his neck and perhaps that was what revived him and gave him the strength to throw himself forward, ducking underneath another vicious kick that had been aimed at his throat.

Alex was in a bad way and he knew it. His nose was bleeding. He could feel the warm blood trickling down over the corner of his mouth. His head was spinning and the electric light bulbs seemed to be flashing in front of his eyes. But the guard wasn't even breathing heavily. For the first time, Alex wondered what it was that he had stumbled onto. What could be so important to the guard that he would be ready to murder a fourteen-year-old boy in cold blood, without even asking questions? Alex wiped the blood away from his mouth and cursed Crawley for coming to him on the football pitch, cursed himself for listening. A front row seat at Wimbledon? At Wimbledon cemetery, perhaps. The guard started walking towards him. Alex tensed himself, then dived out of the way, avoiding a lethal double strike of foot and fist. He landed next to a dustbin, overflowing with rubbish. Using all his strength, he picked it up and threw it, grinning through gritted teeth as the bin crashed into his attacker, spilling rotting food all over him. The guard swore and stumbled backwards. Alex ran round the back of the fridge, trying to catch his breath, searching for a way out.

He had only seconds to spare. He knew that the guard would be coming after him and next time he would finish it. He'd had enough. Alex looked left and right. He saw the cylinders of compressed gas and dragged one out of its wire frame. The cylinder seemed to weigh a ton but Alex was desperate. He wrenched the tap on and heard the gas jetting out. Then, holding the cylinder in front of him with both hands, he stepped forward. At that moment, the guard appeared round the side of the fridge. Alex jerked forward, his muscles screaming, shoving the cylinder into the man's face.

The gas exploded into the man's eyes, temporarily blinding him.

Alex brought the cylinder down, then up again. The metal rim clanged into the guard's head, just above his nose. Alex felt the jolt of solid steel against bone. The guard reeled back. Alex took another step forward. This time he swung the cylinder like a cricket bat, hitting the man with incredible force in the shoulders and neck. The guard never had a chance. He didn't even cry out as he was thrown off his feet and sent hurtling forward into the open fridge.

Alex dropped the cylinder and groaned. It felt as if his arms had been wrenched out of their sockets. His head was still spinning and he wondered if his nose had been broken. He limped forward and looked into the fridge.

There was a curtain of plastic sheets and behind it a mountain of cardboard boxes, each and every one of them filled to the brim with strawberries. Alex couldn't help smiling. Strawberries and cream was one of Wimbledon's greatest traditions, served at crazy prices in the kiosks and restaurants above ground. This was where they were stored. The guard had landed in the middle of the boxes, crushing many of them. He was unconscious, half buried in a blanket of strawberries, his head resting on a bright red pillow of them. Alex stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame for support, allowing the cold air to wash over him. There was a thermostat next to him. Outside, the weather was hot. The strawberries had to be kept chilled. He took one last look at the man who had tried to kill him. "Out cold," he said.

Then he reached out and twisted the thermostat control, sending the temperature down below zero. Out colder. He closed the fridge door and limped painfully away.

THE CRIBBER

It had taken the engineer just a few minutes to take the water dispenser apart. Now he reached inside and carefully disengaged a slim glass phial from a tangle of wires and circuit boards.

“Built into the filter,” he said. “There’s a valve system. Very ingenious.”

He passed the phial to a stern-looking woman who held it up to the light, examining its contents.

The phial was half filled with a transparent liquid. She swilled it round, applied a little to her index finger and sniffed it. Her eyes narrowed. “Librium,” she announced. She had a clipped, matter-of-fact way of speaking. “Nasty little drug. A spoonful will put you out cold. A couple of drops, though ... they’ll just confuse you. Basically knock you off balance.”

The restaurant, and indeed the entire Millennium Building, had been closed for the night. There were three other men there. John Crawley was one. Next to him stood a uniformed policeman, obviously senior. The third man was white-haired and serious, wearing a Wimbledon tie. Alex was sitting to one side, feeling suddenly tired and out of place. Nobody apart from Crawley knew that he worked for MI6. As far as they were concerned, he was just a ballboy who had somehow stumbled on the truth.

Alex was dressed in his own clothes now. He had phoned Crawley, then taken a shower and changed, leaving his ballboy uniform back in his locker. Somehow he knew that he had worn it for the last time. He wondered if he would be allowed to keep the shorts, shirt and Hi-Tec trainers with the crossed racquets logo embroidered on the tongue. The uniform is the only payment Wimbledon ballboys and girls receive.

“It’s pretty clear what was going on,” Crawley was saying now. “You remember, I was worried about that break-in we had, Sir Norman.” This to the man in the club tie. “Well, it seems I was right. They didn’t want to steal anything. They came here to fix up the water dispensers. In the restaurant, in the lounge and probably all over the building. Remote control ... is that right, Henderson?”

Henderson was the man who had taken the water dispenser apart. Another MI6 operative.

“That’s right, sir,” he replied. “The dispenser functioned perfectly normally, giving out iced water. But when it received a radio signal—and that’s what our friend was doing with the fake mobile phone—it injected a few millilitres of this drug, Librium. Not enough to show up in a random blood test if anybody happened to be tested. But enough to destroy their game.”

Alex remembered the German player. Blitz, Leaving the court after he’d lost his match. He had looked dazed and out of focus. But he had been more than that. He had been drugged.

“It’s transparent,” the woman added. “And it has virtually no taste. In a cup of iced water it wouldn’t have been noticed.”

“But I don’t understand!” Sir Norman cut in. “What was the point?”

“I think I can answer that,” the policeman said. “As you know, the guard isn’t talking, but the tattoo on his arm would indicate that he is—or was—a member of the Big Circle.”

“And what exactly would that be?” Sir Norman spluttered.

“It’s a triad, sir. A Chinese gang. The triads, of course, are involved in a range of criminal activities. Drugs. Vice. Illegal immigration. And gambling. I would guess this operation was related to the latter. Like any other sporting event, Wimbledon attracts millions of pounds worth of bets. Now, as I understand it, the young Frenchman—Lefevre—began the tournament with odds of three hundred to one against his actually winning.”

“But then he beat Blitz and Bryant,” Crawley said.

“Exactly. I’m sure Lefevre had no idea, personally, what was going on. But if all his opponents were drugged before they went onto the court... Well, it happened twice. It could have gone on right up to the final. Big Circle would have made a killing! A hundred thousand pounds bet on the Frenchman would have brought them thirty million.”

Sir Norman stood up. “The important thing now is that nobody finds out about this,” he said. “It would be a national scandal and disastrous for our reputation. In fact we’d probably have to begin the whole tournament again!” He glanced at Alex but spoke to Crawley. “Can this boy be trusted not to talk?” he asked.

“I won’t tell anyone what happened,” Alex said.

“Good. Good.”

The policeman nodded. “You did a very good job,” he added. “Spotting this chap in the first place and then following him and all the rest of it. Although, I have to say, I think it was rather irresponsible to lock him in the deep freeze.”

“He tried to kill me,” Alex said.

“Even so! He could have frozen to death. As it is, he may well have lost a couple of fingers from frostbite.”

“I hope that won’t spoil his tennis playing.”

“Well, I don’t know...” The policeman coughed. He was clearly unable to make Alex out.

“Anyway, well done. But next time, do try to think what you’re doing. I’m sure you wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt!”

To hell with the lot of them!

Alex stood watching the waves, black and silver in the moonlight as they rolled into the sweeping curve of Fistril Beach. He was trying to put the policeman, Sir Norman and the whole of Wimbledon out of his mind. He had more or less saved the entire All England Tennis Tournament and although he hadn’t been expecting a season ticket in the royal box and tea with the Duchess of Kent, nor had he thought he would be bundled out

quite so hastily. He had watched the finals, on his own, on TV. At least they'd let him keep his ballboy uniform.

And there was one other good thing that had come out of it all. Sabina hadn't forgotten her invitation.

He was standing on the veranda of the house her parents had rented, a house that would have been ugly anywhere else in the world but which seemed perfectly suited to its position on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Cornish coast. It was old-fashioned, square, part brick, part white-painted wood. It had five bedrooms, three staircases and too many doors. Its garden was more dead than alive, blasted by salt and sea spray. The house was called Brook's Leap, although nobody knew who Brook was, why he had leapt, or even if he had survived. Alex had been there for three days. He had been invited to stay the week.

There was a movement behind him. A door had opened and Sabina Pleasure stepped out, wrapped in a thick towelling robe, carrying two glasses. It was warm outside. Although it had been raining when Alex arrived—it nearly always seemed to be raining in Cornwall—the weather had cleared and this was suddenly a summer's night. Sabina had left him outside while she went in to have a bath. Her hair was still wet. The robe fell loosely down to her bare feet.

Alex thought she looked much older than her fifteen years.

"I brought you a Coke," she said.

"Thanks."

The veranda was wide, with a low balcony, a swing chair and a table. Sabina set the glasses down then sat down herself. Alex joined her. The wooden frame of the swing chair creaked and they swung together, looking out at the view. For a long time neither of them said anything.

Then, suddenly...

"Why don't you tell me the truth?" Sabina asked.

"What d'you mean?"

"I was just thinking about Wimbledon. Why did you leave straight after the quarter finals? You were there one minute. Court Number One! And then —"

"I told you," Alex cut in, feeling uncomfortable. "I wasn't well."

"That's not what I heard. There was a rumour that you were involved in some sort of fight. And that's another thing. I've noticed you in your swimming shorts. I've never seen anyone with so many cuts and bruises."

"I'm bullied at school."

"I don't think so. I've got a friend who goes to Brookland. She says you're never there. You keep disappearing. You were away twice last term and the day you got back, half the school burned down."

Alex leaned forward and picked up his Coke, rolling the cold glass between his hands. An aeroplane was crossing the sky, tiny in the great darkness, its lights blinking on and off.

"All right, Sab," he said. "I'm not really a schoolboy. I'm a spy, a teenage James Bond. I have to take time off from school to save the world. I've done it twice so far. The first time was here in Cornwall. The second time was in France. What else do you want to know?"

Sabina smiled. "All right, Alex. Ask a stupid question..." She drew her legs up, snuggling into the warmth of the towelling robe. "But there is something different about you. You're like no boy I've ever met."

"Kids?" Sabina's mother was calling out from the kitchen. "Shouldn't you be thinking about bed?"

It was ten o'clock. The two of them would be getting up at five to catch the surf.

"Five minutes!" Sabina called back.

"I'm counting."

Sabina sighed. "Mothers!"

But Alex had never known his mother.

Twenty minutes later, getting into bed, he thought about Sabina Pleasure and her parents; her father a slightly bookish man with long grey hair and spectacles, her mother round and cheerful, more like Sabina herself. There were only the three of them. Maybe that was what made them so close. They lived in west London and rented this house for four weeks every summer.

He turned off the light and lay back in the darkness. His room, set high up in the roof of the house, had only one small window and he could see the moon, glowing white, as perfectly round as a one penny piece. From the moment he had arrived, they'd treated him as if they'd known him all his life. Every family has its own routine and Alex had been surprised how quickly he had fallen in with theirs, joining them on long walks along the cliffs, helping with the shopping and the cooking, or simply sharing the silence—reading and watching the sea.

Why couldn't he have had a family like this? Alex felt an old, familiar sadness creep up on him.

His parents had died before he was even a few weeks old. The uncle who had brought him up and who had taught him so much had still been, in many ways, a stranger to him. He had no brothers or sisters. Sometimes he felt as isolated as the plane he had seen from the veranda, making its long journey across the night sky, unnoticed and alone.

Alex pulled the pillows up around his head, annoyed with himself. He had friends. He enjoyed his life. He'd managed to catch up with his work at school and he was having a great holiday.

And with a bit of luck, with the Wimbledon business behind him, MI6 would leave him alone.

So why was he letting himself slip into this mood?

The door opened. Somebody had come into his room. It was Sabina. She was leaning over him.

He felt her hair fall against his cheek and smelled her faint perfume; flowers and white musk.

Her lips brushed gently against his.

"You're much cuter than James Bond," she said.

And then she was gone. The door closed behind her.

Five-fifteen the next morning.

If this had been a schoolday, Alex wouldn't have woken up for another two hours, and even then he would have dragged himself out of bed unwillingly. But this morning he had been awake in an instant. He had felt the energy and tension coursing through him. And walking down to Fistral Beach with the dawn light pink in the sky, he could feel it still. The sea was calling to him, daring him to come in. "Look at the waves!" Sabina said. "They're big," Alex muttered.

"They're huge. This is amazing!" It was true. Alex had been surfing twice before—once in Norfolk, once with his uncle in California—but he had never seen anything like this. There was no wind. The local radio station had warned of deep water squalls and an exceptionally high tide.

Together these had produced waves that took his breath away. They were at least ten feet high, rolling slowly inland as if they carried the weight of the whole ocean on their shoulders. The crash as they broke was huge, terrifying. Alex could feel his heart pounding. He looked at the moving walls of water, the dark blue, the foaming white. Was he really going to ride one of these monsters on a flimsy board made of nothing more than a strip of fibreglass? Sabina had seen him hesitate. "What do you think?" she asked.

"I don't know..." Alex replied and realized he was shouting to make himself heard above the roar of the waves.

"The sea's too strong!" Sabina was a good surfer. The morning before, Alex had watched her skilfully manoeuvring some nasty reefbreaks close to the shore. But now she looked uncertain.

"Maybe we should go back to bed!" she yelled.

Alex took in the whole scene. There were another half-dozen surfers on the beach and, in the far distance, a man steadying a jet ski in the shallow water. He knew that he and Sabina would be the youngest people there. Like her, he was wearing a three millimetre neoprene wetsuit and boots which would protect him from the cold. So why was he shivering? Alex didn't have his own board but had rented an Ocean Magic thruster. Sabina's was a wider, thicker board, going for stability rather than speed, but Alex preferred the thruster for its grip and the feeling of control provided by its three fins. He was glad also that he had chosen an eight-foot-four. If he was going to catch waves as big as these, he was going to need the extra length. If...

Alex wasn't sure he was going into the water. The waves looked about twice as tall as him and he knew that if he made a mistake he could all too easily get killed. Sabina's parents had forbidden her to go in if the sea looked too rough and he had to admit, it had never looked rougher. He watched another wave come crashing down and might have turned back if he hadn't heard one surfer calling to another, the words whipping across the empty sands.

"The Cribber!"

It couldn't be true. The Cribber had come to Fistral Beach. Alex had heard the name many times.

The Cribber had become a legend not just in Cornwall but throughout the surfing world. Its first recorded visit had been in September 1966, more than twenty feet high, the most powerful wave ever to hit the English coast. Since then there had been occasional sightings, but few had seen it and fewer still had managed to take the ride.

"The Cribber! The Cribber!" The other surfers were calling its name, whooping and shouting. He watched them dance across the sand, their boards over their heads. Suddenly he knew that he had to go into the water. He was too young. The waves were too big. But he would never forgive himself if he missed the chance.

"I'm going!" he shouted and ran forward, carrying his board in front of him, the tail connected to his ankle by a tough urethane leash. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sabina raise a hand in a gesture of good luck, but by then he had reached the edge of the sea and felt the cold water grip his ankles. He threw the board down and dived on top of it, the momentum carrying him forward. And then he was lying flat on his stomach, his legs stretched out behind him, his hands paddling furiously over the top of the board. This was the most exhausting part of the journey.

Alex concentrated on his arms and shoulders, keeping the rest of his body still. He had a long way to go. He needed to conserve energy.

He heard a sound above the pounding of the sea and noticed the jet ski pulling away from the shore. That puzzled him. PWCs—personal water craft—were rare in Cornwall and he certainly hadn't seen this one before. Normally they were used to tow surfers out to the bigger waves, but this jet ski was striking out on its own. He could see the rider, hooded, in a black wetsuit. Was he—or she—planning to ride the Cribber on a machine?

He forgot about it. His arms were getting tired now and he hadn't even made it halfway. His cupped hands scooped the water and he felt himself shoot forward. The other surfers were well ahead of him. He could see the point where the waves crested, about twenty metres away. A mountain of water rose up in front of him and he duck-dived through it. For a moment he was blind. He tasted salt and the chill of the water hammered into his skull. But then he was out the other side. He fixed his eyes on the horizon and redoubled his efforts. The thruster carried him forward as if it had somehow been filled with a life of its own.

Alex stopped and drew breath. Suddenly everything seemed very silent. He was still lying on his stomach, rising and falling as he was swept over the waves. He looked back at the shoreline and was surprised to see how far he had come. Sabina was sitting watching him, a tiny speck in the distance. The nearest surfer was about thirty metres away, too far to help if anything went wrong.

There was a knot of fear in his stomach and he wondered if he hadn't been a bit hasty, coming out here on his own. But it was too late now.

He sensed it before he saw it. It was as if the world had chosen that moment to come to an end and all nature was taking one final breath. He turned and there it was. The Cribber was coming.

It was hurtling towards him. Now it was too late to change his mind.

For a few seconds Alex stared in astonishment at the rolling, curving, thundering water. It was like watching a four-storey building wrench itself out of the ground and hurl itself onto the street.

It was built entirely out of water, but the water was alive. Alex could feel its incredible strength.

Suddenly, awesomely, it rose up in front of him. And went on rising until it had blotted out the sky. Techniques that he had learned a long time ago took over automatically. Alex grabbed the edge of the board and turned round so that he was once again facing the shore. He forced himself to wait until the last second. Move too late and he would miss everything. But too early and he would simply be crushed. His muscles tensed. His teeth were chattering. His whole body seemed to have become electrified. Now!

This was the most difficult part, the movement that was hardest to learn but impossible to forget.

The pop-up. Alex could feel the board travelling with the pulse of the wave. His speed and the speed of the water had become one. He brought his hands down, flat on the board, arched his back and pushed. At the same time, he brought his right leg forward. Goofy-footed. When he was snowboarding, he was exactly the same. But he didn't care, as long as he could actually stand up without losing his balance, and already he was doing just that, balancing the two main forces, speed and gravity, as the thruster sliced diagonally across the wave.

He stood straight, his arms out, his teeth bared, perfectly centred on the board. He had done it!

He was riding the Cribber. Sheer exhilaration coursed through him. He could feel the power of the wave. He was part of it. He was plugged into the world and although he must be travelling at sixty, seventy kilometres per hour, time seemed to have slowed down almost to a halt and he was frozen in this one, perfect moment that would be with him for the rest of his life. He yelled out loud, an animal cry that he couldn't even hear. Spray rushed into his face, exploding around him.

He could barely feel the thruster under his feet. He was flying. He had never been more alive.

And then he heard it over the roar of the waves. It was coming up fast to one side of him, the whine of a petrol engine. To hear anything mechanical here, at this time, was so unlikely that he thought he must have imagined it. Then he remembered the jet ski. It must have gone out to sea and then circled round, behind the waves. Now it was coming in fast.

His first thought was that the rider was "dropping in". It was one of the unwritten laws of surfing. Alex was up and riding. This was his wave. The rider had no right to cut into his space.

But at the same time, he knew that was crazy. Fistral Beach was practically deserted. There was no need to fight for space. And anyway, a jet ski coming after a surfer...it was unheard of.

The engine was louder now. Alex couldn't see the jet ski. His entire concentration was fixed on the Cribber, on keeping his balance, and he didn't dare turn round. He was suddenly aware of the rushing water, thousands of gallons of it, thundering under his feet. If he fell he would die, ripped apart before he could drown. What was the jet ski doing? Why was it coming so close?

Alex knew he was in danger quite suddenly and with total certainty. What was happening had nothing to do with Cornwall and his surfing holiday. His other life, his life with MI6, had caught up with him. He remembered being chased down the mountainside at Point Blanc and knew that the same thing was happening again. Who or why didn't matter. He had just seconds to do something before the jet ski ran him down.

He flicked his head and saw it for just a second. A black nose like a torpedo. Gleaming chrome and glass. A man squatting low over the controls, his eyes fixed on Alex. The eyes were filled with hatred. They were less than a metre away.

There was only one thing Alex could do and he did it instantly, without thinking. The aerial is a move that demands split-second timing and total confidence. Alex twisted round and projected himself off the top of the wave and out into the air. At the same time, he crouched down and seized hold of the thruster, one hand on each side. Now he really was flying, suspended in midair as the wave rolled away beneath him. He saw the jet ski race past, covering the area where he had been only seconds before. He spun round, drawing an almost complete circle in the air. At the last moment, he remembered to place his foot right in the centre of the board. This would take all his weight when he landed.

The water rushed up to meet him. Alex finished his circle and plunged once again onto the face of the wave. It was a perfect landing. Water exploded around him but he remained upright and now he was just behind the jet ski. The rider turned back and Alex saw the look of astonishment on his face. The man was Chinese. Impossibly, incredibly, he was holding a gun. Alex saw it come up, water dripping off the barrel. This time there was nowhere he could go. He didn't have the strength to try another aerial. With a shout, he threw himself off the board and forward, onto the jet ski. He felt a jolt, his leg almost being pulled off as his board was torn away by the suddenly malevolent water.

There was an explosion. The man had fired. But the bullet missed. Alex thought he felt it pass over his shoulder. At the same moment, his hands grabbed the man's throat. His knees crashed into the side of the jet ski. And then the entire world was whipped away as man and machine lost control and tumbled into a spinning vortex of water. Alex's leg jerked a second time and he felt the leash snap. He heard a shout. Suddenly the man wasn't there any more. Alex was on his own.

He couldn't breathe. Water pounded down on him. He felt himself being sucked helplessly into it. He couldn't struggle. His arms and legs were useless. He had no strength left. He opened his mouth to scream and the water rushed in.

Then his shoulder hit something hard and he knew he had reached the bottom of the sea and that this would have to be his grave. He had dared to play with the Cribber and the Cribber had taken its revenge. Somewhere, far above, another wave broke over him, but Alex didn't see it. He lay where he was, finally at peace.

TWO WEEKS IN THE SUN

Alex wasn't sure what was more surprising. To be still alive, or to find himself back in the London headquarters of the Special Operations division of MI6.

The fact that he was still breathing was, he knew, entirely down to Sabina. She had been sitting on the beach, watching in awe as he rode the Cribber towards her. She had seen the jet ski coming up behind him even before he did and had known instinctively that something was wrong. She had started running the moment Alex had leapt into the air and was already in the water by the time he crashed down next to the jet ski and then disappeared below the surface.

Later on, she would say that there had been a collision ... a terrible accident. From that distance it was impossible to see what had really taken place.

Sabina was a strong swimmer and luck was on her side. Although the water was murky and the waves still huge, she knew where Alex had gone down and she was there in less than a minute.

She found him on her third dive, dragged his unconscious body to the surface and then pulled him ashore. She had learned mouth-to-mouth resuscitation at school and she used that knowledge now, pressing her lips against his, forcing the air into his lungs. Even then, she was sure that Alex was dead. He wasn't breathing. His eyes were closed. Sabina pounded on his chest—once, twice—and was finally rewarded with a sudden spasm and a fit of coughing as Alex came to. By then, some of the other surfers had arrived. One of them had a mobile phone and called for an ambulance. There was no sign of the man on the jet ski.

Alex had been lucky too. As it turned out, he had ridden the Cribber just far enough to be near the end of its journey, when the wave had been at its weakest. A ton of water had fallen onto him, but five seconds earlier and it might have been ten tons. Also, he hadn't been too far from the shore when Sabina found him. Any further out and she might never have found him at all.

Five days had passed since then.

It was Monday morning, the start of a new week. Alex was sitting in room 1605, on the sixteenth floor of the anonymous building in Liverpool Street. He had sworn that he would never return here. The man and the woman with him in the room were the last two people he wanted to see.

And yet here he was. He had been drawn in as easily as a fish in a net.

As usual, Alan Blunt didn't seem particularly pleased to see him, preferring to study the file on the desk in front of him rather than the boy himself. It was the fifth or sixth time Alex had met the man in overall command of this section of MI6 and he still knew almost nothing about him.

Blunt was about fifty, a man in a suit in an office. He didn't seem to smoke and Alex couldn't imagine him drinking either. Was he married? Did he have children? Did he spend his weekends walking in the park or fishing or watching football matches? Somehow Alex doubted it. He wondered if Blunt had any existence at all outside these four walls. He was a man defined by his work. His whole life was devoted to secrets, and in the end his own life had become a secret itself. He looked up from the neatly printed report.

"Crawley had no right to involve you in this business," he said. Alex said nothing. For once, he wasn't sure that he disagreed.

"The Wimbledon tennis championships. You nearly got yourself killed." He glanced quizzically at Alex. "And this business in Cornwall. I don't like my agents getting involved in dangerous sports."

"I'm not one of your agents," Alex said.

"There's enough danger in the job without adding to it," Blunt went on, ignoring him. "What happened to the man on the jet ski?" he asked.

"We're interrogating him now," Mrs Jones replied.

The deputy head of Special Operations was wearing a grey trouser suit, with a black leather handbag that matched her eyes. There was a silver brooch on her lapel, shaped like a miniature dagger. It seemed appropriate.

She had been the first to visit Alex as he'd recovered in hospital in Newquay and she at least had been concerned about what had happened. Of course, she had shown little or no emotion. If anyone had asked, she would have said that she didn't want to lose someone who had been useful to her and who might be useful again. But Alex suspected this was only half the story. She was a woman and he was fourteen years old. If Mrs Jones had a son, he could well be the same age as Alex. That made a difference—one that she wasn't quite able to ignore.

"We found a tattoo on the man's arm," she continued. "It seems that he was also a member of the Big Circle gang." She turned to Alex. "The Big Circle is a relatively new triad," she explained.

"It's also, unfortunately, one of the most violent."

"I think I'd noticed," Alex said.

"The man you knocked out and refrigerated at Wimbledon was a Sai-b. That means „little brother“. You have to understand how these people work. You smashed their operation and made them lose face. That's the last thing they can afford. So they sent someone after you. He hasn't said anything yet but we believe he's a Dai-io, or a „big brother“. He'll have a rank of 438 ...

that's one under the Dragon Head, the leader of the triad. And now he's failed too. It's a little unfortunate, Alex, that as well as half-drowning him, you also broke his nose. The triad will take that as another humiliation."

"I didn't do anything," Alex said. It was true. He remembered how the thruster had finally been torn away from his ankle. It wasn't his fault that it had hit the man in the face.

"That's not how they'll see it," Mrs Jones went on. She sounded like a schoolteacher. "What we're dealing with here is Guan-shi."

Alex waited for her to explain.

"Guan-shi is what gives Big Circle its power," she said. "It's a system of mutual respect. It ties all the members together. It essentially means that if you hurt one of them, you hurt them all.

And if one of them becomes your enemy, they all do."

"You attack one of their people at Wimbledon," Blunt rasped, "they send another down to Cornwall."

"You take out their man in Cornwall, the order goes out to the other members of the triad to kill you," Mrs Jones said.

"How many other members are there?" Alex asked. "About nineteen thousand at the last count,"

Blunt replied.

There was a long silence, punctured only by the distant traffic sixteen floors below.

"Every minute you stay in this country, you're in danger," Mrs Jones said. "And there's not a great deal we can do. Of course, we have some influence with the triads. If we let the right people know that you're protected by us, it may be possible to call them off. But that's going to take time and the fact of the matter is, they're probably working on the next plan of attack right now."

"You can't go home," Blunt said. "You can't go back to school. You can't go anywhere on your own. That woman who looks after you, the housekeeper, we've already arranged for her to be sent out of London. We can't take any chances."

"So what am I meant to do?" Alex asked. Mrs Jones glanced at Blunt, who nodded. Neither of them looked particularly concerned and he suddenly realized that things had worked out exactly as they wanted. Somehow, without knowing it, he had played right into their hands.

"By coincidence, Alex," Mrs Jones began, "a few days ago we had a request for your services. It came from an American intelligence service. The Central Intelligence Agency—or CIA as you probably know them. They need a young person for an operation they happen to be mounting and they wondered if you might be available."

Alex was surprised. MI6 had used him twice and both times they had stressed that nobody was to know. Now, it seemed, they had been boasting about their teenage spy. Worse than that, they had even been preparing to lend him out, like a library book.

As if reading his mind, Mrs Jones raised a hand. "We had told them, of course, that you had no wish to continue in this line of work," she said. "That was, after all, what you had told us. A schoolboy, not a spy. That's what you said. But it does seem now that everything has changed.

I'm sorry, Alex, but for whatever reason, you've chosen to go back into the field and unfortunately you're in danger. You have to disappear. This might be the best way."

"You want me to go to America?" Alex asked. "Not exactly America," Blunt cut in. "We want you to go to Cuba ... or, at least, to an island just a few miles south of Cuba. It's called Cayo Esqueleto. That's Spanish. It means—"

"Skeleton Key," Alex said. "That's right. Of course, there are plenty of keys off the coast of America. You'll have heard of Key Largo and Key West. This one was discovered by Sir Francis Drake. The story goes that when he landed there, the place was uninhabited. But he found a single skeleton, a conquistador in full armour, sitting on the beach. That was how the island got its name. Anyway, no matter what it's called, it's actually a very beautiful place. A tourist resort.

Luxury hotels, diving, sailing... We're not asking you to do anything dangerous, Alex. Quite the contrary. You can think of this as a paid holiday. Two weeks in the sun."

"Go on," Alex said. He couldn't help sounding doubtful.

"The CIA is interested in Cayo Esqueleto because of a man who lives there. He's a Russian. He has a huge house—some might even call it a palace—on a sort of isthmus, that is to say, a narrow strip of land at the very northern tip of the island. His name is General Alexei Sarov."

Blunt pulled a photograph out of the file and turned it round so that Alex could see. It showed a fit-looking man in military uniform. The picture had been taken in Red Square, Moscow. Alex could see the onion-shaped towers of the Kremlin behind him.

"Sarov belongs to a different age," Mrs Jones said, taking over. "He was a commander in the Russian army at a time when the Russians were our enemies and still part of the Soviet Union.

This wasn't very long ago, Alex. The collapse of communism. It was only in 1989 that the Berlin Wall came down." She stopped. "I suppose none of this means very much to you."

"Well, it wouldn't," Alex said. "I was only two years old."

"Yes, of course. But you have to understand, Sarov was a hero of the old Russia. He was made a general when he was only thirty-eight—the same year that his country invaded Afghanistan. He fought there for ten years, rising to be second in command of the Red Army. He had a son who was killed there. Sarov didn't even go the funeral. It would have meant abandoning his men and he wouldn't do that—not even for one day."

Alex looked at the photograph again. He could see the hardness in the man's eyes. It was a face without a shred of warmth.

"The war in Afghanistan ended when the Soviets withdrew in 1989," Mrs Jones continued. "At the same time, the whole country was falling apart. Communism came to an end and Sarov left.

He made no secret of the fact that he didn't like the new Russia with its jeans and Nike trainers and McDonald's on every street corner. He left the army, although he still calls himself General, and went to live—"

"In Skeleton Key." Alex finished the sentence.

"Yes. He's been there for ten years now—and this is the point, Alex. In two weeks' time, the Russian president is planning to meet him there. There's nothing surprising in that. The two men are old friends. They even grew up in the same part of Moscow. But the CIA are worried. They want

to know what Sarov is up to. Why are the two men meeting? Old Russia and new Russia.

What's going on?"

"The CIA want to spy on Sarov."

"Yes. It's a simple surveillance operation. They want to send in an undercover team to take a look around before the president arrives."

"Fine." Alex shrugged. "But why do they need me?"

"Because Skeleton Key is a communist island," Blunt explained. "It belongs to Cuba, one of the last places in the western world where communism still exists. Getting in and out of the place is extremely difficult. There's an airport at Santiago. But every plane is watched. Every passenger is checked. They're always on the lookout for American spies and anyone who is even slightly suspect is stopped and turned away."

"And that's why the CIA have come to us," Mrs Jones continued. "A single man might be suspicious. A man and a woman might be a team. But a man and a woman travelling with a child...? That has to be a family!"

"That's all they want from you, Alex," Blunt said. "You go in with them. You stay at their hotel.

You swim, snorkel and enjoy the sun. They do all the work. You're only there as part of their cover."

"Couldn't they use an American boy?" Alex asked.

Blunt coughed, obviously embarrassed. "The Americans would never use one of their own young people in an exercise like this," he said. "They have a different set of rules to us."

"You mean they'd be worried about getting him killed."

"We wouldn't have asked you, Alex," Mrs Jones broke the awkward silence. "But you have to leave London. In fact, you have to leave England. We're not trying to get you killed. We're trying to protect you and this is the best way. Mr Blunt is right. Cayo Esqueleto is a beautiful island and you're really very lucky to be going there. You can look on the whole thing as a free holiday."

Alex thought it over. He looked from Alan Blunt to Mrs Jones, but of course they were giving nothing away. How many agents had sat in this room with the two of them, listening to their honeyed words? It's a simple job. Nothing to it. You'll be back in two weeks...

His own uncle had been one of them, sent to check on security in a computer factory on the south coast. But Ian Rider had never made it back.

Alex wanted none of it. There were still a few weeks of the summer holidays left and he wanted to see Sabina again. The two of them had talked about northern France and the Loire Valley, youth hostels and hiking. He had friends in London. Jack Starbright, his housekeeper and closest friend, had offered to take him with her when she visited her parents in Chicago. Seven weeks of normality. Was it too much to ask?

And yet, he remembered what had happened on the Cribber when the man on the jet ski had caught up with him. Alex had seen his eyes for just a few seconds but there had been no mistaking their cruelty and fanaticism. This was a man who had been prepared to chase him across the top of a twenty-foot wave in order to mow him down from behind—and he had come perilously close to succeeding. Alex knew, with a sick certainty, that the triad would try again.

He had offended them ... not once now, but twice. Blunt was right about that. Any hope of an ordinary summer had gone out the window.

"If I help your friends in the CIA, you can get the triad to leave me alone?" he asked.

Mrs Jones nodded. "We have contacts in the Chinese underworld. But it will take time, Alex.

Whatever happens, you're going to have to go into hiding—at least for the next couple of weeks."

So why not do it in the sun?

Alex nodded wearily. "All right," he said. "It seems I don't really have a lot of choice. When do you want me to leave?"

Blunt took an envelope out of the file. "I have your air ticket here," he said. "There's a flight this afternoon."

Of course, they had known he would accept.

"We will want to keep in touch with you while you're away," Mrs Jones muttered.

"I'll send you a postcard," Alex said.

"No, Alex, that's not quite what I had in mind. Why don't you go and have a word with Smithers?"

Smithers had an office on the eleventh floor of the building and at first Alex had to admit he was disappointed.

It was Smithers who had designed the various gadgets Alex had used on his previous missions and Alex had expected to find him somewhere in the basement, surrounded by cars and motorbikes, hi-tech weapons and men and women in white coats. But this room was boring: large, square and anonymous. It could have belonged to the chief executive of almost anything; an insurance company, perhaps, or a bank. There was a steel and glass desk with a telephone, a computer, "in" and "out" trays and an anglepoise lamp. A leather sofa stood against one wall, and on the other side of the room was a silver filing cabinet with six drawers. A picture hung on the wall behind the desk; a view of the sea. But disappointingly, there were no gadgets anywhere. Not so much as an electric pencil sharpener.

Smithers himself was behind the desk, tapping at the computer with fingers almost too big for the keys. He was one of the fattest people Alex had ever met. Today he was wearing a black three-piece suit with what looked like an old school tie perched limply on the great bulge of his stomach. Seeing Alex, he stopped typing and swivelled round in a leather chair that must have been reinforced to take his weight.

"My dear boy!" he exclaimed. "How delightful to see you. Come in, come in! How have you been keeping? I hear you had a bit of trouble, that business in France. You really must look after yourself, Alex. I'd be mortified if anything happened to you. Door!"

Alex was surprised when the door swung shut behind him.

"Voice activated," Smithers explained. "Do, please, sit down."

Alex sat on a second leather chair on the other side of the desk. As he did so, there was a low hum and the anglepoise lamp swivelled round and bent towards him like some sort of metallic bird taking a closer look. At the same time, the computer screen flickered and a human skeleton appeared. Alex moved a hand. The skeleton's hand moved. With a shudder, he realized he was looking at—or rather, through—himself.

"You're looking well," Smithers said. "Good bone structure!"

"What...?" Alex began.

"It's just something I've been working on. A simple X-ray device. Useful if anyone is wearing a gun." Smithers pressed a button and the screen went blank. "Now, Mr Blunt tells me that you're off to join our friends in the CIA. They're fine operators. Very, very good—except, of course, you can never trust them and they have no sense of humour. Cayo Esqueleto, I understand...?"

He leant forward and pressed another button on the desk. Alex glanced at the painting on the wall. The waves had begun to move! At the same time, the image shifted, pulling back, and he realized that he was looking at a plasma television screen with a picture beamed by satellite from somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean. Alex found himself looking down on an irregularly shaped island surrounded by turquoise water. The image was time coded and he realized that it was being broadcast into the room live.

"Tropical climate," Smithers muttered. "There'll be quite a lot of rainfall at this time of year.

I've been developing a poncho that doubles as a parachute, but I don't think you'll need that.

And I've got a marvellous mosquito coil. As a matter of fact, mosquitoes are about the only thing it won't knock out. But you won't need that either! In fact, I'm told the only thing you actually do need is something to help you keep in touch."

"A secret transmitter," Alex said.

"Why does it have to be secret?" Smithers pulled open a drawer and took out an object which he placed in front of Alex.

It was a mobile phone.

"I've already got one, thanks," Alex muttered.

"Not one like this," Smithers retorted. "It gives you a direct link with this office, even when you're in America. It works underwater—and in space. The pads are fingerprint sensitive so only you can use it. This is the model five. We also have a model seven. You hold it upside down when you dial or it blows up in your hand—"

"Why can't I have that model?" Alex asked.

"Mr. Blunt has forbidden it." Smithers leant forward conspiratorially. "But I have put in a little extra for you. You see the aerial just here? Dial 999 and it'll shoot out like a needle. Drugged, of course. It'll knock out anyone in a twenty metre range."

"Right." Alex picked up the phone. "Have you got anything else?"

"I was told you weren't to have any weapons..." Smithers sighed, then leant forward and spoke into a potted plant. "Could you bring them up, please, Miss Pickering?"

Alex was beginning to have serious doubts about this office—and these were confirmed a moment later when the leather sofa suddenly split in half, the two ends moving away from each other. At the same time, part of the floor slid aside to allow another piece of sofa to shoot silently into place, turning the two-seater into a three-seater. A young woman had been carried up with the new piece. She was sitting with her legs crossed and her hands on her knee. She stood up and walked over to Smithers.

"These are the items you requested," she said, handing over a package. She produced a sheet of paper and placed it in front of him. "And this report just came in from Cairo."

"Thank you, Miss Pickering." Smithers waited until the woman had left—using the door this time—then glanced quickly at the report. "Not good news," he muttered. "Not good news at all.

Oh well..." He slid the report into the "out" tray. There was a flash of electricity as the paper self-destructed. A second later, there were only ashes left. "I'm bending the rules doing this," he went on. "But there were a couple of things I'd been developing for you and I don't see why you shouldn't take them with you. Better safe than sorry."

He turned the package upside down and a bright pink packet of bubblegum slid out. "The fun of working with you, Alex," Smithers said, "is adapting the things you'd expect to find in the pockets of a boy your age. And I'm extremely pleased with this one."

"Bubblegum?"

"It blows rather special bubbles. Chew it for thirty seconds and the chemicals in your saliva react with the compound, making it expand. And as it expands, it'll shatter just about anything. Put it in a gun, for example, and it'll crack it open. Or the lock on a door."

Alex turned the packet over. Written in yellow letters on the side was the word BUBBLE 0-7.

"What flavour did you make it?" he asked.

"Strawberry. Now, this other device is even more dangerous and I'm sure you won't need it. I call it the Striker and I'd be very happy to have it back."

Smithers shook the package and a keyring slid out to join the bubblegum on the desk. It had a plastic figurine attached, a footballer wearing white shorts and a red shirt. Alex leant forward and turned it over. He found himself looking at a three centimetre high model of Michael Owen.

"Thanks, Mr Smithers," he said. "But personally I've never supported Liverpool."

"This is the prototype. We can always do another footballer next time. The important thing is the head. Remember this, Alex. Twist it round twice clockwise and once anti-clockwise and you'll arm the device."

"It'll explode?"

"It's a stun grenade. Flash and a bang. A ten second fuse. Not powerful enough to kill—but in a confined space it will incapacitate the opposition for a couple of minutes, which might give you a chance to get away."

Alex pocketed the Michael Owen figure and the bubblegum along with the mobile telephone. He stood up, feeling more confident. This might be a simple surveillance operation, a paid holiday as Blunt had put it, but he still didn't want to go empty-handed.

"Good luck, Alex," Smithers said. "I hope you get on all right with the CIA. They're not really like us, you know. And heaven knows what they'll make of you."

"I'll see you, Mr Smithers."

"I've got a private lift if you're going downstairs." As Smithers spoke, the six drawers of the filing cabinet slid open, three going one way, three going the other, to reveal a brightly lit cubicle behind.

Alex shook his head. "Thanks, Mr Smithers," he said. "I'll take the stairs."

"Whatever you say, old boy. Just look after yourself. And whatever you do, don't swallow the gum!"

NOT SO SPECIAL AGENTS

They had a late breakfast at a café in Bayside Marketplace, right on the quayside, with boats moored all around them and bright yellow and green water taxis nipping back and forth. Tom Turner and Belinda Troy had knocked on Alex's door at ten o'clock that morning. In fact, Alex had been awake for several hours. He had fallen asleep fast, slept heavily and woken too early—

the classic pattern of trans-Atlantic jet-lag. But at least he'd had plenty of time to read through the papers that Joe Byrne had given him. He now knew everything about his new identity—the best friends he had never met, the pet dog he had never seen, even the high school grades he had never achieved. And now he was sitting with his new mother and father watching the tourists on the boardwalk, strolling in and out of the pretty white-fronted boutiques that cluttered the area.

The sun was already high, the glare coming off the water almost blinding. Alex slipped on a pair of Oakley Eye Jackets and the world on the other side of the black iridium lenses became softer and more manageable. The glasses had been a present from Jack. He hadn't expected to need them so soon.

There was a book of matches on the table with the words THE SNACKYARD printed on the cover. Alex picked it up and turned it over in his fingers. The matches were warm. He was surprised the sun hadn't set them alight. A waiter in black and white, complete with bow tie, came over to take the order. Alex glanced at the menu. He had never thought it possible to have so much choice for breakfast. At the next table a man was eating his way through a stack of pancakes with bacon, hash browns and scrambled eggs. Alex was hungry but the sight took away his own appetite.

"I'll just have some orange juice and toast," he said.

"Wholemeal or granary?"

"Granary. With butter and jam—"

"You mean jelly!" Troy paused until the waiter had gone. "No American kid asks for jam." She scowled. "You ask for that at Santiago Airport and we'll be in jail—or worse—before you can blink."

"I wasn't thinking," Alex began.

"You don't think, you get killed. Worse, you get us killed." She shook her head. "I still say this is a bad idea."

"How's Lucky?" Turner asked.

Alex's head spun. What was he talking about? Then he remembered. Lucky was the Labrador dog that the Gardiner family was supposed to have back in Los Angeles. "He's fine," Alex said.

"He's being looked after by Mrs Beach." She was the woman who lived next door.

But Turner wasn't impressed. "Not fast enough," he said. "If you have to stop to think about it, the enemy will know you're telling a lie. You have to talk about your dog and your neighbours as if you've known them all your life."

It wasn't fair, of course. Turner and Troy hadn't prepared him. He hadn't realized the test had already begun. In fact, this was the third time Alex had gone undercover with a new identity. He had been Felix Lester when he had been sent to Cornwall, and Alex Friend, the son of a multimillionaire, in the French Alps. Both times he had managed to play the part successfully and he knew that he could do it again now as Alex Gardiner.

"So how long have you been with the CIA?" Alex asked.

"That's classified information," Turner replied. He saw the look on Alex's face and softened.

"All my life," he said. "I was in the marines. It's what I always wanted to do, even when I was a kid ... younger than you. I want to die for my country. That's my dream."

"We shouldn't be talking about ourselves," Belinda said angrily. "We're meant to be a family."

"So let's talk about the family!"

"All right, Mom," Alex muttered.

They asked him a few more questions about Los Angeles while they waited for the food to arrive. Alex answered on autopilot. He watched a couple of teenagers go past on skateboards and wished he could join them. That was what a fourteen year old should be doing in the Miami sunshine. Not playing spy games with two sour-faced adults who had already decided they weren't going to give him a chance.

The food came. Turner and Troy had both ordered fruit salad and cappuccino—decaffeinated with skimmed milk. Alex guessed they were watching their weight. His own toast came—with grape jelly. The butter was whipped and white and seemed to disappear when it was spread.

"So who is the Salesman?" Alex asked.

"You don't need to know that," Turner replied.

Alex decided he'd had enough. He put down his knife. "All right," he said. "You've made it pretty clear that you don't want to work with me. Well, that's fine, because I don't want to work with you either. And for what it's worth, nobody would ever believe you were my parents because no parents would ever behave like you two!"

"Alex—" Troy began.

"Forget it! I'm going back to London. And if your Mr Byrne asks why, you can tell him I didn't like the jelly so I went home to get some jam."

He stood up. Troy was on her feet at the same time. Alex glanced at Turner. He was looking uncertain too. He guessed that they would have been glad to see the back of him. But at the same time, they were afraid of their boss.

"Sit down, Alex," Troy said. She shrugged. "OK. We were out of line. We didn't mean to give you a hard time."

Alex met her eyes. He slowly sat down again.

"It's just gonna take us a bit of time to get used to the situation," Troy went on. "Turner and me ... we've worked together before ... but we don't know you."

Turner nodded. "You get killed, how's that gonna make us feel?"

"I was told there wasn't going to be any danger," Alex said. "Anyway, I can look after myself."

"I don't believe that."

Alex opened his mouth to speak, then stopped himself. There was no point arguing with these people. They'd already made up their minds, and anyway, they were the sort who were always right. He'd met teachers just like them. But at least he'd achieved something now. The two special agents had decided to loosen up.

"You want to know about the Salesman?" Troy began. "He's a crook. He's based here in Miami.

He's a nasty piece of work."

"He's Mexican," Turner added. "From Mexico City."

"So what does he do?"

"He does just what his name says. He sells things. Drugs. Weapons. False identities.

Information." Troy ticked off the list on her fingers. "If you need something and it's against the law, the Salesman will supply it. At a price, of course."

"I thought you were investigating Sarov."

"We are." Turner hesitated. "The Salesman may have sold something to Sarov. That's the connection."

"What did he sell?"

"We don't know for sure." Turner was looking increasingly nervous. "We just know that two of the Salesman's agents flew into Skeleton Key recently. They flew in but they didn't fly out again. We've been trying to find out what Sarov was buying."

"What's all this got to do with the Russian president?" Alex still wasn't sure he was being told the truth.

"We won't know that until we know what it was that Sarov bought," Troy said, as if explaining something to a six year old.

"I've been working undercover with the Salesman for a while now," Turner went on. "I'm buying drugs. Half a million dollars' worth of cocaine, being flown in from Colombia. At least, that's what he thinks." Turner smiled. "We have a pretty good relationship. He trusts me. And today just happens to be the Salesman's birthday, so he invited me to go for a drink on his boat."

Alex looked across to the sea. "Which one is it?"

"That one." Turner pointed at a boat moored at the end of a jetty about fifty metres away. Alex drew a breath.

It was one of the most beautiful boats he had ever seen. Not sleek, white and fibreglass like so many of the cruisers he had seen moored around Miami. Not even modern. She was called *Mayfair Lady* and was an Edwardian classic motor yacht, eighty years old, like something out of a black and white film. The boat was one hundred and twenty feet long with a single funnel rising over its centre. The main saloon was at deck level, just behind the bridge. A sweeping line of fifteen or more portholes suggested cabins and dining rooms below. The boat was cream with natural wood trimmings, a wooden deck and brass lamps under the canopies. A tall, slender mast rose up at the front with a radar, the boat's one visible connection with the twenty-first century.

Mayfair Lady didn't belong in Miami. She belonged in a museum. And every boat that came near her was somehow ugly by comparison.

"It's a nice boat," Alex said. "The Salesman must be doing well."

"The Salesman should be in jail," Troy muttered. She had seen the admiring Look in Alex's eyes and didn't approve. "And one day that's where we're going to put him."

"Thirty years to life," Turner agreed.

Troy dug her spoon into her fruit salad. "All right, Alex," she said, "let's start again. Your maths teacher. What's her name?"

Alex looked round. "Her name is Mrs Hazeldene. And—nice try—but we learn maths in England. Americans learn math."

Troy nodded but didn't smile. "You're getting there," she said.

They finished their breakfast. The CIA agents tested Alex on a few more details, then lapsed into silence. They didn't ask him about his life in England, his friends, or how he had stumbled into the world of MI6. They didn't seem to want to know anything about him.

The skateboarders had stopped playing and were slumped on the boardwalk, drinking Cokes.

Turner looked at his watch. "Time to go," he muttered.

"I'll stay with the kid," Troy said.

"I shouldn't be more than twenty minutes." Turner stood up, then slapped his hand against his head. "Hell! I didn't get the Salesman a birthday present!"

"He won't mind," Troy said. "Tell him you forgot."

"You don't think he'll be upset?"

"It's OK, Turner. Invite him out for lunch another time. He'll like that."

Turner smiled. "Good idea."

"Good luck," Alex said.

Turner got up and left. As he walked away, Alex noticed a man in a bright Hawaiian shirt and white trousers coming from the opposite direction. It was impossible to see the man's face because he was wearing sunglasses and a straw hat. But he must have been involved in some sort of terrible accident—his legs were dragging awkwardly and there seemed to be no life in his arms. For a moment he was right next to Turner on the boardwalk. Turner didn't notice him.

Then, moving surprisingly quickly, he had gone.

Alex and Troy watched as Turner walked all the way along to Mayfair Lady. There was a ramp at the end of the jetty, leading up to deck level. It allowed the crew to wheel supplies on board. A couple of men were just finishing as Turner arrived. He spoke to them. One of them pointed in the direction of the saloon cabin. Turner went up the ramp and disappeared on board.

"What happens now?" Alex asked.

"We wait."

For about fifteen minutes nothing happened. Alex tried to talk to Troy but her attention was fixed on the boat and she said nothing. He wondered about the relationship between the two agents.

They obviously knew each other well and Byrne had told him they'd worked together before.

Neither of them showed their emotions, but he wondered if their friendship might be more than professional.

Then Alex saw Troy sit up in her seat. He followed her eyes back to the boat. Smoke was coming out of the funnel. The engines had started up. The two crewmen Turner had spoken to were on the jetty. One of them untied the boat, then climbed onboard. The other one walked off.

Slowly, Mayfair Lady began to move away from her mooring.

"Something's gone wrong," Troy whispered. She wasn't talking to Alex. She was talking to herself.

"What do you mean?"

Her head snapped round as she remembered he was there. "It was a ten minute meeting. Tom wasn't meant to be going anywhere."

Tom. It was the first time she had used his first name.

"Maybe he changed his mind," Alex suggested. "Maybe the Salesman invited him on a cruise."

"He wouldn't have gone. Not without me. Not without cover. It's against company procedure."

"Then..."

"His cover's been blown." Troy's face was suddenly pale. "They must have found out he's an agent. They're taking him out to sea with them..."

She was standing up now but not moving, paralysed with indecision. The boat was still moving gracefully. Already a full half of its length was projecting out beyond the jetty. Even if she ran forward, she would never reach it in time.

"What are you going to do?" Alex asked.

"I don't know."

"Are they going to...?"

"If they know who he is, they'll kill him." She snapped the words as if this was somehow Alex's fault, as if it was a stupid question that he should never have asked. And maybe it was this that decided him. Suddenly, before he even knew what he was doing, he was on his feet and running.

He was angry. He was going to show them that he was more than the dumb English kid they obviously thought he was.

"Alex!" Troy called out.

He ignored her. He had already reached the boardwalk. The two teenagers he had seen earlier were sitting in the sun, finishing their drinks, and they didn't see him snatch one of their skateboards and jump onto it. It was only as he pushed off, propelling himself over the wooden surface towards the departing boat, that one of them shouted in his direction, but by then it was too late.

Alex was balanced perfectly. Snowboards, skateboards, surfboards, they were all the same to him. And this skateboard was a beauty, a Flexdex downhill racer with ABEC5 racing bearings and kryptonite wheels. How typical of Miami kids to buy only the best. He shifted his weight, suddenly aware that he had neither helmet nor knee-pads. If he came off now, it was going to hurt. But that was the least of his worries. The boat was pulling away. Even as Alex watched, the stern with its churning propellers slid past the end of the jetty. Now the boat was at sea. He could see the name, Mayfair Lady, dwindling as it moved into the distance. In seconds it would be too far away to reach.

Alex hit the ramp that the men had been using to load and unload the boat. He soared upwards and suddenly he was in mid-air, flying. He felt the skateboard fall away from his feet, heard it splash into the sea. But his own momentum carried him forward. He wasn't going to make it!

The boat was moving too fast. Alex was plunging down now, following an arc that was going to miss the stern by centimetres. It would bring him crashing down into the water—and then what?

The propellers! They would slice him to pieces. Alex stretched out his arms and somehow his scrabbling fingers made contact with the rail that curved round the back of the boat. His body smashed into the metal stern, his feet dipping into the water above the propellers.

He felt the breath punched out of him. Somebody on the boat must have heard. But he couldn't worry about that now. He would just have to hope that the noise of the engines had covered the collision. Using all his strength, he pulled himself up and over the rail. And then, finally, he was on the deck, soaked to the knees, his entire body aching from the impact. But he was onboard.

And miraculously, he hadn't been seen.

He crouched down, taking stock of his surroundings. The stern deck was a small, semi-enclosed area, shaped like a horseshoe. In front of him was the saloon cabin with a single window facing back and the door a little further down the side. There was a stack of supplies underneath a tarpaulin and also two large cans. Alex unscrewed one of the lids and sniffed. It was full of petrol. The Salesman obviously planned to be away for some time.

The entire deck, both port and starboard, was overshadowed by a canopy hanging down on either side of the main saloon and there was a wooden lifeboat suspended on two pulleys above his head. Resting briefly against the stern rail, Alex knew he was safe provided nobody actually walked to the back of the boat. How many crew members would there be? Presumably there was a captain at the wheel. He might have someone with him. Looking up, Alex glimpsed a pair of feet crossing the upper deck on the roof of the saloon. That made three. There could be two or three more inside. Six perhaps in total?

He looked back. The port of Miami was already slipping away behind him. Alex got up and slipped off his shoes and socks. Then he crept forward, moving absolutely silently, still nervous about being spotted from the upper deck. The first two windows of the saloon were closed but the third was open and crouching below it he heard a voice. A man was talking. He had a thick Mexican accent and every time he spoke the letter S, he whistled softly.

"You are a foolish man. Your name is Tom Turner. You work for the CIA. And I am going to kill you."

Another man spoke briefly. "You're wrong. I don't know what you're talking about." Alex recognized Turner's voice. He glanced left and right. Then, with his shoulders against the cabin wall, he levered himself upwards until his head reached the level of the window and he could look in.

The saloon cabin was rectangular, with a wooden floor partially covered by a carpet that had been rolled back—presumably to avoid bloodstains. Unlike the boat, the furniture was modern, office-like. There wasn't a great deal of it. Turner was sitting in a chair with his hands behind his back. Alex could see that some sort of parcel tape had been used to tie his arms and legs. He had already been beaten. His fair hair was damp and blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth.

There were two men in the cabin with him. One was a deckhand in jeans and black T-shirt, his stomach bulging out over his belt. The other had to be the Salesman. He was a round-faced man with very black hair and a small moustache. He was wearing a three-piece white suit, immaculately tailored, and brightly polished leather shoes. The deckhand was holding a gun, a large, heavy automatic. The Salesman was sitting in a cane chair, holding a glass of red wine. He rolled it in front of his nose, enjoying the aroma, then sipped.

"What a delicious wine!" he muttered. "This is Chilean. A Cabernet Sauvignon grown on my own estate. You see, my friend, I am successful. I have businesses all over the world. People want to drink wine? I sell wine. People want to take drugs? They are mad, but that is no concern of mine. I sell drugs. What is so wrong with that? I sell anything that anyone wishes to buy. But, you see, I am a careful man. I did not buy your story. I made certain enquiries. The Central Intelligence Agency is mentioned. And that is why you find yourself here."

"What do you want to know?" Turner rasped.

"I want to know when we are one hour out of Miami because that is when I intend to shoot you and dump you over the side." The Salesman smiled. "That is all."

Alex sank down again. There was no point listening to any more. He couldn't go into the cabin.

There were two of them and only one of him. And although he had a weapon, it wouldn't be enough. Not against a gun. He needed a diversion.

Then he remembered the petrol. Glancing quickly at the upper deck he prepared to go back to the stern, then froze as the door of the bridge opened and a man came out. There was nothing Alex could do; nowhere he could hide. But he was lucky. The man, dressed in the faded uniform of a ship's captain, had been smoking a cigarette. He stopped long enough to throw the butt into the sea, then went back the way he had come without turning his head. It had been a close escape and Alex knew it could only be a matter of time before he was noticed. He had to move fast.

He ran on tiptoe to the petrol cans. He tried tilting one of them but it was too heavy. He looked around for a rag, couldn't find one and so took off his shirt, ripping it apart in his hands. Quickly he pushed the sleeve into the can, soaking it in petrol. Then he pulled it out, leaving only the end still dangling inside; a makeshift fuse. What would happen when he set fire to the petrol? Alex guessed that the explosion would be enough to attract the attention of everyone onboard but not strong enough to kill anyone or sink the boat. Since he was still going to be onboard, he would just have to hope he was right.

He reached into his pocket and took out the book of matches that he had been playing with in the restaurant. Cupping his hand to protect the flame from the breeze, he lit first one match, then the whole book. He touched the flame against the rag that had once been his shirt. The whole thing was alight in a second.

Running forward again, he returned to the saloon cabin. He could hear the Salesman still speaking inside.

"Another glass, I think. Yes. But then I'm afraid I must leave you. I have work to do."

Alex looked in. The Salesman was standing at a table, pouring himself a second glass of wine.

Alex looked back over his shoulder. There was no one there. Nothing had happened. Why hadn't the petrol caught fire? Had the wind blown out his makeshift fuse?

And then it exploded. A great mushroom of flame and black smoke leapt into the air at the back of the boat, snatched away instantly by the wind. Somebody shouted. Alex saw that the petrol had splashed all over both decks. There was fire everywhere. The canopy right above his head was alight. Whatever had been packed underneath the tarpaulin was also blazing. More shouting.

Footsteps thudded towards the stern deck. Now was the time to move.

"See what is happening!"

Alex heard the Salesman snap the command and a second later the deckhand came racing out.

He disappeared round the other side of the cabin.

That just left the Salesman himself, on his own with Turner. Alex waited a few seconds, then stepped into the doorway, once again reaching into his trouser pocket. Turner saw him before the Salesman. His eyes widened. The Salesman turned. Alex saw that he had put down his glass and picked up a gun. For a moment neither of them moved. The Salesman was looking at a fourteen-year-old boy, barefoot and naked from the waist up. It obviously hadn't occurred to him that Alex could be any threat to him, that it was this boy who had set fire to his boat. And in that moment of hesitation, Alex made his move.

When he brought his hand up, he was holding a mobile phone. He had already dialled two nines before he'd gone in. He pressed the button for a third time as he aimed with the phone.

"It's for you!" he said.

He felt the phone shudder in his hand and, silently, the aerial spat out of the top, the plastic peeling back to reveal a shining needle. It travelled across the cabin and hit the Salesman square in the chest. The Salesman had reacted fast, already bringing his gun round. But a second later his eyes rolled and he slumped to the floor. Alex jumped over him, picked up a knife from the table and went over to Turner.

"What the hell...?" the CIA man began. Alex could see at once that he wasn't badly hurt. At the same time, his mood didn't seem to have improved. He looked from the phone to the unconscious figure of the Salesman. "What did you do to him?" he asked.

"He got the wrong number," Alex said. He cut through the adhesive tape.

Turner got to his feet and snatched up the gun that the Salesman had dropped. He checked the clip. The gun was fully loaded. "What happened?" he demanded. "I heard an explosion!"

"Yeah. That was me. I set the boat alight."

"What?"

"I set fire to the boat."

"But we're on the boat!"

"I know."

Before Alex could say any more, Turner moved, twisting round, snapping into combat position, arms up, legs apart. There was a stairwell at the far end of the cabin. Alex hadn't noticed it before. A figure had appeared, coming up from below. Turner fired twice. The figure crumpled back down. Turner stopped. Black smoke was seeping into the cabin. There was a second explosion and the entire boat rocked as if seized by a sudden squall. There was shouting outside on the deck. Looking out of the window, Alex could see flames.

"That must have been the second petrol tank," he said.

"How many tanks are there?"

"Just the two."

Turner seemed almost dazed. He forced himself to a decision. "The sea..." he said. "We're going to have to swim."

The CIA agent went first, edging sideways out of the cabin. Suddenly the deck was full of people. There were at least seven of them. Alex wondered where they had all come from. Two of them, young men in dirty white shirts and jeans, were fighting the flames with extinguishers.

There were two on the roof, another on the deck. All of them were shouting.

Smoke was trailing into the sky behind the boat. The lifeboat was ablaze. Part of the canopy was on fire. At least nobody knew quite what had happened. Nobody had seen Alex come on board.

The explosions had taken them all by surprise and all they cared about was getting the fire under control. However, as Turner came out of the cabin, one of the men on the upper deck saw him.

He called out in Spanish.

"Move!" Turner shouted.

He ran for the edge of the boat. Alex followed.

There was the deafening chatter of a machine-gun and what was left of the canopy above his head was torn to shreds. Bullets smashed into the deck sending chips of wood flying. A glass bulb exploded. Alex wasn't even sure who was firing. All he knew was that he was trapped in the middle of smoke and flames and bullets and a lot of men who wanted him dead. He saw Turner dive over the side. There was another burst from the machine-gun and Alex felt the deck rip itself apart centimetres from his bare feet. He yelled out. Splinters slammed into his ankle and heels. He spurted forward and threw himself over the handrail. For what felt like an eternity everything was chaos. He could feel the wind racing over his bare shoulders. There were more gunshots. Then he plunged headfirst into the Atlantic and disappeared beneath the surface.

Alex allowed the ocean to embrace him. After the battlefield that Mayfair Lady had become, its water was warm and soothing. He swam down, a powerful breaststroke that took him ever deeper. Something whizzed past him and he realized that he was still being shot at. The further down he went, the safer he would be. He opened his eyes. The salt water stung but he needed to know how far he was going. He looked up. Light glimmered at the surface but there was no sign of the boat. His lungs were beginning to hurt. He needed to breathe. But still he waited. He would have been happy if he could have stayed underwater for an hour.

He couldn't. With his body crying out for oxygen, Alex kicked reluctantly for the surface. He came up gasping, with water streaming down his face.

Turner was next to him. The CIA agent looked more dead than alive. Alex wondered if he had been hit, but there was no sign of any blood. Perhaps he was in shock.

"Are you all right?" Alex asked.

"Are you crazy?" Turner was so angry that he actually swallowed water as he spoke. He spluttered and fought to keep himself from going under. "You could have gotten us killed!"

"I just saved your life!" Alex was getting angry himself. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You think so? Look!"

With a sense of dread, Alex swivelled round in the water. Mayfair Lady hadn't been destroyed.

The fire was out. And the boat was coming back.

He had been underwater for perhaps ninety seconds. In that time, the ship had continued forward with all hands fighting the flames and nobody at the wheel. The engine had been at full throttle and it was now about five hundred metres away. But the captain had obviously returned to the bridge. The boat was wheeling round. Alex could make out four or five men standing at the bow.

All of them were armed. They had seen him. One of them pointed and shouted. He and Turner were helpless, floating in the water with perhaps one weapon between them. Soon the boat would reach them. They were sitting targets, to be picked off like ducks in a fair.

What could he do? He looked at Turner, hoping the older man would produce something, some rabbit out of the hat. Didn't the CIA have gadgets? Where was the inflatable speedboat or the concealed aqualung? But Turner was helpless. He'd even managed to lose the gun.

Mayfair Lady completed her turn.

Turner swore.

The boat drew closer, slicing through the water.

And then it exploded. This time the explosions were huge, final. There were three of them, simultaneous, in the bow, the middle and the stern. Mayfair Lady was blown into three quite separate pieces, the funnel and main saloon heaving themselves out of the ocean as if trying to escape from the rest of the boat. Alex felt the Shockwave travel through the water. The blast was deafening. A fist of water smashed into him, almost knocking him out. Pieces of wood, some of them on fire, rained down all around. He knew at once that nobody could have survived. And with that knowledge came a terrible thought.

Was it his fault? Had he killed them all?

Turner must have been thinking the same thing. He said nothing. The two of them watched as the three sections of what had once been a classic motor yacht sank and disappeared.

There was the sound of an outboard motor. Alex twisted round. A speedboat was racing towards them. He saw Belinda Troy at the wheel. She must have somehow commandeered it and come after them. She was on her own.

She helped Turner out of the water first, then Alex. For the first time, Alex realized that he couldn't see land. He felt that it had all happened so quickly. And yet Mayfair Lady had managed to put several kilometres between itself and the coast before it was destroyed.

"What happened?" Troy asked. The wind had caught her long hair and spread it all around her.

She looked as if she was having hysterics. "I saw the boat blow. I thought you were—" She stopped and caught her breath. "What happened?" she repeated.

"It was the kid." Turner's voice was neutral. He was still trying to catch up with the events of the last few minutes. "He cut me free..."

"You were tied up?"

"Yes. The Salesman knew I was with the agency. He was going to kill me. Alex knocked him out. He had some sort of cell phone..." He was stating the facts, but there was no gratitude. The boat rocked gently. Nobody moved. "He blew up the boat. He killed them all."

"No." Alex shook his head. "The fire was out. You saw. They'd got the boat under control. They were turning round, about to come back—"

"For God's sake!" The CIA man was almost too tired to argue. "What do you think happened?"

You think one of the lights fused and Mayfair Lady just happened to blow up? You did it, Alex.

You set the gas alight and that's what happened."

Gas. The American for petrol. It was one of the words they had tested him on at the Snackyard that morning. A century ago.

"I saved your life," Alex said.

"Yeah. Thanks, Alex." But Turner's voice was bleak.

Troy climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. The speedboat turned and they headed back towards the shore.

PASSPORT CONTROL

Alex said little at dinner that night. Although the hotel had seemed empty earlier in the day, he was surprised how many guests had appeared for dinner in their loose skirts, shirts and sun-tans, and he knew it would be impossible to talk openly now.

They were sitting on the restaurant terrace which overlooked the sea, eating fish—as fresh as Alex had ever tasted—served with rice, salad and black beans. After the intense heat of the afternoon, the air was cool and welcoming. Two guitarists, lit by candles, were playing soft Latin music. Cicadas rasped and rattled in their thousands, hidden in the undergrowth.

The three of them talked like any family would. The towns they were going to visit, the beaches where they wanted to swim. Turner told a joke and Troy laughed loud enough to turn heads. But it was all fake. They weren't going anywhere and the joke hadn't been funny. Despite the food and the surroundings, Alex found himself hating every minute of the role he had been forced to play. The last time he had sat down with a family had been with Sabina and her parents in Cornwall. It seemed a very long time ago and this meal, with these people, somehow turned the memory sour.

But at last it was over and Alex was able to excuse himself and go to bed. He went back to his room, swinging the door shut behind him. For a moment he stood there with his shoulders resting against the wood. He looked around him. Something was wrong. He stepped forward carefully, his nerves jangling. Someone had been there. His case, which had been closed when he left, was now open. Had someone from the hotel been in and searched the room while he was at dinner?

Were they still there now? He looked in the bathroom and behind the curtains. No one. Then he went over to the case. It took him a few moments to realize that only the Game Boy was missing.

So that was what had happened! Turner or Troy must have somehow slipped into the room while he was out. The Game Boy with its hidden Geiger counter was central to their mission. They had taken it back.

Alex undressed quickly and got into bed, but suddenly he wasn't tired. He lay in the darkness, listening to the waves breaking against the sand. He could see thousands of stars through the open window. He had never realized there were so many of them, nor that they could shine so bright. Turner and Troy returned to their room about half an hour later. He heard them talking in low voices but couldn't make out what they said. He pulled the sheet over his head and forced himself to sleep.

The first thing he saw when he woke up the next morning was a note pushed under his door. He got out of bed and picked it up. It was written in block capitals.

GONE FOR A WALK. THOUGHT YOU NEEDED A REST. WE'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU

LATER. MOM XXX.

Alex tore the note in half—and then in half again. He scattered the pieces in the wastepaper basket and went out to breakfast. It occurred to him that it was a strange set of parents who would walk off, leaving their son behind, but he supposed there were probably plenty of families, with nannies and au pairs, who often did the same. He spent the morning on the beach, reading.

There were some other boys of about his own age playing in the sea and he thought of joining them. But they didn't speak English and seemed too self-contained. At eleven o'clock, his

"parents" still hadn't returned. Suddenly Alex was fed up, sitting there on his own in the grounds of the hotel. He was on an island on the other side of the world. He might as well see some of it!

He got dressed and set off into town.

The heat struck him the moment he stepped outside the grounds of the hotel. The road curved inland, away from the sea, following a line of scrubland on one side and what looked like a tobacco plantation—a mass of fat, green leaves rising to chest height—on the other. The landscape was flat but there was no breeze coming in from the sea. The air was heavy and still.

Alex was soon sweating and had to swat at the flies that seemed determined to follow him every step of the way. A few buildings, sun-bleached wood and corrugated iron, sprang up around him.

A fly buzzed in his ear. He beat it away.

It took him twenty minutes to reach Puerto Madre, a fishing village that had grown into a dense and cluttered town. The buildings were an amazing jumble of different styles; rickety wooden shops, marble and brick houses, huge stone churches. Everything had been beaten down and baked by the sun—and sunlight was everywhere; in the dust, in the vivid colours, in the smells of spice and overripe fruit.

The noise was deafening. Radio music—jazz and salsa—blasted out of open windows.

Extraordinary American cars, vintage Chevrolets and Studebakers like brilliantly coloured toys, jammed the streets, their horns blaring as they tried to make their way past horses and carts, motorized rickshaws, cigarette sellers and shoe-shine boys. Old men in vests sat outside the cafes blinking in the sunlight. Women in tight-fitting dresses stood languidly in the doorways. Alex had never been anywhere louder or dirtier or more alive.

Somehow he found himself in the main square with a great statue at the centre; a revolutionary soldier with a rifle at his side and a grenade hanging from his belt. There must have been at least a hundred market stalls jammed into the square, selling fruit and vegetables, coffee beans, souvenirs, old books and T-shirts. And everywhere there were crowds, strolling in and out of the dollar shops and the ice-cream parlours, sitting at tables beneath sweeping colonnades, queuing up in the fast food restaurants and the paladares—tiny restaurants located inside private houses.

There was a street sign bolted to a wall. It read: PLAZA DE FRATERNIDAD. Alex had enough Spanish to translate that. Brotherhood Square. He somehow doubted that he would find much brotherhood here. A fat man in an old and dirty linen suit suddenly lurched up to him.

"You want cigars? The best Havana cigars. But at cheap, cheap price."

"Hey, amigo. I sell you a T-shirt..."

“Muchacho! You bring your parents to my bar...”

Before he knew it, he was surrounded. Alex realized how much he must stand out in this crowd of dark, tropical people milling about in their brightly coloured shirts and straw hats. He was hot and thirsty. He looked around him for somewhere to get a drink.

And that was when he saw Turner and Troy. The two special agents were sitting at a wrought iron table in front of one of the smarter restaurants, shaded by a great vine that sprawled and tumbled over the pockmarked wall. A neon sign hung over them, advertising Montecristo cigars.

They were with a man, an islander, obviously deep in conversation. All three of them had drinks.

Alex moved towards them, wondering if it would be possible to hear what they were saying.

The man they were talking to looked about seventy years old and was dressed in a dark shirt, loose trousers and a beret. He was smoking a cigarette which seemed to have been pushed through his lips dragging the skin with it. His face, arms and neck were sun-beaten and withered.

But as he drew closer, Alex saw the light and the strength in his eyes. Troy said something and the man laughed, picked up his glass with a hand that was all bone and threw back the contents in one. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, said something and walked away. Alex had arrived just too late to eavesdrop on the conversation. He decided to make himself known.

“Alex!” As ever, Troy didn’t look glad to see him.

“Hi, Mom.” Alex sat down without being invited. “Any chance of a drink?”

“What are you doing here?” Turner asked. Once again his mouth was a straight line. His eyes were empty. “We told you to stay at the hotel.”

“I thought this was meant to be a family holiday,” Alex said. “And anyway, I finished searching the hotel this morning. There aren’t any nuclear weapons there, in case you were wondering...”

Turner stared. Troy looked around nervously. “Keep your voice down!” she snapped, as if anyone could hear him in the din of the square.

“You lied to me,” Alex said. “Whatever the reason you’re here, you’re not just spying on General Sarov. Why don’t you tell me what this is really about?”

There was a long silence.

“What do you want to drink?” Troy asked.

Alex glanced down at Troy’s glass. It contained a pale yellow liquid that looked good. “What have you got?” he asked.

“A mojito. It’s a local speciality. A mixture of rum, fresh lemon juice, crushed ice, soda and mint leaves.”

“That sounds fine. I’ll have the same. Without the rum.”

Turner called a waiter over and spoke briefly in Spanish. The waiter nodded and hurried away.

Meanwhile, Troy had come to a decision. “All right, Alex,” she said. “We’ll tell you what you want to know—”

“That’s against orders!” Turner interrupted.

Troy looked angrily at him. “What choice do we have? Alex obviously knows about the Game Boy.”

“The Geiger counter,” Alex said.

Troy nodded. “Yes, Alex, that’s what it is. And it’s the reason why we’re here.” She lifted her own drink and took a sip. “We didn’t want you to know this because we didn’t want to frighten you.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“We were ordered not to!” She scowled. “But ... all right, since you know so much, you might as well know the rest of it. We believe there’s a nuclear device hidden on this island.”

“General Sarov...? You think he’s got a nuclear bomb?”

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Turner muttered.

But this time Troy ignored him. “Something is happening, here, on Skeleton Key,” she went on.

“We don’t know what it is, but if you want the truth, it actually frightens us. In a few days’ time, Boris Kiriyenko, the Russian president, is arriving for a two-week vacation. That’s not such a big deal. He knew Sarov a long time ago. They were kids together. And it’s not as if the Russians are our enemies any more.”

Alex knew all this already. It was what Blunt had told him in London.

“But recently, and quite by coincidence, Sarov came to our attention. Turner and I were investigating the Salesman. And we discovered that among all the other things he’d been selling, he’d managed to get his hands on a kilogram of weapons grade uranium, smuggled out of Eastern Europe. For what it’s worth, this is one of the biggest nightmares facing the security services today—the sale of uranium. But he’d done it—and if that wasn’t bad enough, the person he’d sold it to—”

“—was Sarov.” Alex finished the sentence.

“Yes. A plane flew into Skeleton Key and it didn’t fly out again. Sarov was there to meet it.” She paused. “And now, suddenly, we’ve got a meeting between these two men—the old general and the new president—and there may be a nuclear bomb in the picture. So you won’t be surprised to hear that there are a whole lot of worried people in Washington. That’s why we’re here.”

Alex absorbed what he was being told. Inside, he was seething. Blunt had promised him two weeks in the sun. But it looked like he’d been sent to

the front line of World War Three.

"If it is a bomb, what's Sarov planning to do with it?" Alex asked.

"If we knew that, we wouldn't be here!" she snapped. Alex looked at her closely. He was amazed to see that she really was scared. She was trying not to show it but it was there, in her eyes and the tautness of her jaw.

"Our job is to find the nuclear material," Turner said.

"With the Geiger counter."

"Yes. We need to break into Casa de Oro and take a look around. That's what we were talking about just now."

"Who was he? The man you were with?"

Turner sighed. He had already said much more than he wanted to "His name is Garcia. He's one of our assets."

"Assets?"

"That means he works for us," Troy explained. "We've been paying him over the years to keep us informed and to help us when we're here."

"He has a boat," Turner continued, "and we're going to need it because there's only one way into the Casa de Oro—and that's by sea. The house is built on a sort of plateau right at the tip of the island. It's an old sugar plantation. They used to grow sugar cane there and they've got an old mill that's still in full working order. Anyway, there's only one road that reaches it and it's narrow, with a steep drop down to the sea on both sides. There are security men and a gate. We'd never get in that way."

"But by boat—" Alex began.

"Not by boat..." Turner hesitated, wondering if he should go on. He looked at Troy, who nodded. "We're going to use scuba. You see, we know something that Sarov may not. There's a way into the grounds of the villa that goes past his defences. It's a natural fault line, a shaft inside the cliff that runs all the way from the top to the bottom."

"You're going to climb it?"

"There are metal rungs. Garcia's family has been on the island for centuries and they know every inch of the coastline. He swears the ladder is still there. Three hundred years ago it was used by smugglers to get from the villa to the beach without being seen. There was a cave at the bottom.

The shaft—they call it the Devil's Chimney—runs all the way up and comes out somewhere in the garden. That's our way in."

"Wait a minute." Alex was confused. "You said you were going to use scuba."

Troy nodded. "The water level has risen all around the island and the entrance to the cave is now submerged. It's about twenty metres underwater. But that's great for us. Most people have forgotten the cave is even there at all. Certainly, it won't be guarded. We swim down in scuba gear. We climb the ladder and get into the grounds. We search the villa."

"And if you find the bomb?"

"That's not our problem, Alex. Our work will be done."

The waiter arrived with Alex's drink. He picked up the glass. Even the feel of it, cold against his skin, came as a relief. He drank some. It was sweet and surprisingly refreshing. He set the glass down.

"I want to come with you," he said.

"Forget it. No way!" Troy sounded incredulous. "Why do you think I've told you all this? Only because you know too much already and I need you to understand that we mean business. You have to keep out of the way. This is not a child's game. We're not zapping the bad guy on a computer screen! This is the real thing, Alex. And you're going to stay in the hotel and wait for us to get back!"

"I'm coming with you," Alex insisted. "Maybe you've forgotten, but this is meant to be a family holiday. You dump me on my own in the hotel a second time, maybe somebody's going to notice. Maybe they're going to start wondering where you are."

Turner fiddled with the collar of his shirt. Troy looked away.

"I won't get in your way," Alex sighed. "I'm not asking to come scuba-diving with you. Or climbing. I just want to be on the boat. Think about it. If the three of us go together, it'll look more like a family cruise."

Turner nodded slowly. "You know, Troy, the kid has a point."

Troy picked up her drink and gazed into it moodily, as if trying to find an answer inside the glass. "All right," she said at last. "You can come with us if that's what you really want. But you're not part of this, Alex. Your job was to help get us onto the island and if you ask me, we didn't even need you for that. You saw the security at the airport, it was a joke! But OK, since you're here, you might as well come along for the ride. But I don't want to hear you. I don't want to see you. I don't want to know you're there."

"Whatever you say," Alex sat back. He had got what he wanted, but he had to ask himself why he wanted it at all. Given the choice, he would have preferred to take the first plane off the island and put as much distance as possible between himself and the CIA and Sarov and the whole lot of them.

But that was a choice he didn't have. All Alex knew was that he didn't want to spend time in the hotel on his own, worrying. If there really was a bomb somewhere on the island, he wanted to be the first to hear about it. And there was something else. Turner and Troy seemed confident enough about this Devil's Chimney. They had assumed that it wasn't guarded and that it would take them all the way to the top. But they had been equally confident when they had gone to the Salesman's birthday party, and that had almost got Turner killed.

Alex finished his drink. "All right," he said. "So when do we go?"

Troy fell silent. Turner took out his wallet and paid for the drinks. "Straight away," he said.

"We're doing it tonight."

THE DEVIL'S CHIMNEY

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It was late afternoon when they set out from Puerto Madre, leaving the port with its fish markets and pleasure cruisers behind them. Turner and Troy were going to make the dive while it was still light. They would find the cave and wait there until sunset, then climb up into Casa de Oro under cover of darkness. That was the plan.

The man called Garcia had a boat that had known the sea too long. It wheezed and spluttered out of the harbour, trailing a cloud of evil-smelling black smoke. Rust had rippled and then burst through every surface like some bad skin disease. The boat had no visible name. A few flags fluttered from the mast, but they were little more than rags, with any trace of their original colours faded long ago. There were six air cylinders lashed to a bench underneath a canopy.

They were the only new equipment in sight.

Garcia himself had greeted Alex with a mixture of hostility and suspicion. Then he had spoken at length, in Spanish, with Turner. Alex had spent the best part of a year in Barcelona with his uncle and understood enough of the language to follow what they were saying.

"You never talked about a boy. What do you think this is? A tourist excursion? Who is he? Why did you bring him here?"

"It's none of your business, Garcia. Let's go."

"You paid for two passengers." Garcia held up two withered fingers, every bone and sinew showing through. "Two passengers ... that was what we agreed."

"You're being paid well enough. There's no point arguing. The boy's coming and that's the end of it!"

After that, Garcia fell into sullen silence. Not that there would have been any point talking anyway. The noise of the engine was too great.

Alex watched as the coastline of Cayo Esqueleto slipped past. He had to admit that Blunt had been right—the island was strangely beautiful with its extraordinary, deep colours; the palm trees packed together, separated from the sea by a brilliant ribbon of white sand. The sun was hovering, a perfect circle, over the horizon. A brown pelican, clumsy and comical on the ground, shot out of a pine tree and soared gracefully over their heads. Alex felt strangely at peace. Even the noise of the engine seemed to have drifted away.

After about half an hour, the land began to rise up and he realized they had reached the north point of the island. The vegetation fell back and suddenly he was looking at a sheer rock wall that dropped all the way, without interruption, to the sea. This must be the isthmus that he had been told about, with the road leading to the Casa de Oro somewhere at the top. There was no sign of the house itself but, craning his neck, he could just make out the top of a tower, white and elegant, with a pointed red slate roof. A watch-tower. There was a single figure framed in an archway, barely more than a speck. Somehow Alex knew that it was an armed guard.

Garcia turned off the engine and moved to the back of the boat. For such an old man, he seemed very agile. He picked up an anchor and threw it over the side, then hoisted a flag—this one more identifiable than the others. It showed a diagonal white stripe on a red background. Alex recognized the international scuba-diving sign.

Troy came over to him. "We'll go down here and swim in to the coast," she said.

Alex looked up at the figure in the tower. There was a glint of sunlight reflecting off something.

A pair of binoculars? "I think we're being watched," he said.

Troy nodded. "Yes. But it doesn't matter. Dive boats aren't allowed to come here but they sometimes do. They're used to it. The shore is strictly off-limits but there's a wreck somewhere

... people swim to that. We'll be fine, provided we don't draw attention to ourselves. Just don't do anything stupid, Alex."

Even now she couldn't resist lecturing him. Alex wondered what he would have to do to impress these people. He said nothing.

Turner had taken off his shirt, showing a hairless, muscular chest. Alex watched as he stripped down to his trunks, then pulled on a wetsuit which he had taken from a small cabin below.

Quickly the two CIA agents got ready, attaching air cylinders to their buoyancy jackets—

BCDs—then adding weight belts, masks and snorkels. Garcia was smoking, sitting to one side and watching all this with quiet amusement, as if it really had nothing to do with him.

At last they were ready. Turner had brought a waterproof bag with him and he unzipped it. Alex noticed the Game Boy sealed in a plastic bag inside. There were also maps, torches, knives and a harpoon gun.

"Leave it all, Turner," Troy said.

"The Game Boy...?"

"We'll come back for it." Troy turned to Alex. "Right, Alex," she said. "Listen up! We're going to make an exploratory dive to begin with. We'll be gone about twenty minutes. No longer. We need to find the cave entrance and check there are no security devices in operation." She glanced at her watch. It was only half past six. "The sun won't set for another hour," she continued. "We don't want to spend that long sitting in the cave, so we'll come back to the boat for the rest of our equipment, change tanks and make a second journey back. You don't have to worry about anything. As far as the people in the villa are concerned, we're just tourists doing a sunset dive."

"I'm a qualified diver," Alex said.

"The hell with that!" Turner cut in.

Troy agreed. "You talked your way onto the boat," she said. "Fine. Personally, I wish you'd stayed in the hotel. But maybe you were right about that, it might have raised suspicions."

"You're not coming with us," Turner said. He looked at Alex coldly. "We don't want any more people killed. You stay here with Garcia and leave the rest to us."

The two agents made their all-important buddy checks, each one looking over the other's equipment. No pipes twisted. Air in the tanks. Weights and releases. Finally, they went over to the side of the boat and sat with their backs facing the sea. They both put on their fins. Turner gave Troy the all-clear sign: second finger and thumb forming an O, with the other fingers raised. They lowered their masks and rolled over backwards, disappearing immediately into the depths of the sea.

That was the last time Alex saw them alive.

He sat with Garcia on the gently rocking boat. The sun was almost touching the horizon and a few clouds, deep red, had intruded into the sky. The air was warm and pleasant. Garcia sucked on his cigarette and the tip glowed.

"You American?" he asked suddenly, speaking in English.

"No. I'm English."

"Why you here?" Garcia smiled as if amused to find himself alone at sea with an English boy.

"I don't know." Alex shrugged. "How about you?"

"Money." The one word answer was enough.

Garcia came over and sat down next to Alex, examining him with two dark eyes that were suddenly very serious. "They don't like you," he said.

"I don't think so," Alex agreed.

"You know why?"

Alex said nothing.

"They are grown-ups. They think they are good at what they do. And then they find a child who is better. And not only that. He is an English child. Not an Americano!" Garcia chuckled and Alex wondered how much he had been told. "It makes them feel uncomfortable. It's the same all over the world."

"I didn't ask to be here," Alex said.

"But still you came. They would have been happier without you."

The boat creaked. A light breeze had sprung up, rippling the flags. The sun was sinking faster now and the whole sky was turning to blood. Alex looked at his watch. Ten to seven. The twenty minutes had passed quickly. He scanned the surface of the ocean but there was no sign of Turner or Troy.

Another five minutes passed. Alex was beginning to feel uneasy. He didn't know the two agents well, but guessed they were people who did everything by the book. They had their procedures, and if they said twenty minutes, they meant twenty minutes. They had been underwater now for twenty-five. Of course, they had enough oxygen for an hour. But even so, Alex wondered why they were taking so long.

A quarter of an hour later, they still hadn't come back. Alex couldn't disguise his fears. He was pacing the deck, looking left and right, searching for the tell-tale bubbles that would show them coming up, hoping to see their arms and heads breaking the surface of the water. Garcia hadn't moved. Alex wondered if the old man was even awake. A full forty minutes had passed since Turner and Troy had submerged.

"Something's wrong," Alex said. Garcia didn't answer. "What are we going to do?" Still Garcia refused to speak and Alex became angry. "Didn't they have a back-up plan? What did they tell you to do?"

"They tell me to wait for them." Garcia opened his eyes. "I wait an hour. I wait two hours. I wait all night..."

"But in another ten or fifteen minutes they're going to run out of air."

"Maybe they enter the Devil's Chimney. Maybe they climb up!"

"No. That wasn't their plan. And anyway, they've left all their equipment behind." Suddenly Alex had made up his mind. "Have you got any more scuba gear? Another BCD?"

Garcia stared at Alex, surprised. Then he slowly nodded.

Five minutes later, Alex stood on the deck dressed only in shorts and a T-shirt, with an oxygen cylinder strapped to his back and two respirators—one to breathe through, the other spare—

dangling at his side. He would have liked to put on a wetsuit, but he hadn't been able to find one his size. He would just have to hope that the water wasn't too cold. The BCD he was wearing was old and it was too big for him, but he had quickly tested it and at least it worked. He looked at his instrument console; pressure gauge, depth gauge and compass. He had 3000psi in his air tank. More than he would need. Finally, he had a knife strapped to his leg. He probably wouldn't use it and would never normally have worn it. But he needed the reassurance. He went over to the side of the boat and sat down.

Garcia shook his head disapprovingly. Alex knew he was right. He was breaking the single most critical rule in the world of scuba-diving. Nobody ever dives alone. He had been taught scuba by his uncle when he was eleven years old and if Ian Rider had been here now he would have been speechless with anger and disbelief. If you get into trouble—a snagged air hose or a valve failure—and you don't have a buddy, you're dead. It's as

simple as that. But this was an emergency. Turner and Troy had been gone for forty-five minutes. Alex had to help.

"You take this," Garcia said suddenly. He was holding an out of date dive computer. It would show Alex how deep he was and how long he had been down.

"Thanks," Alex said. He took it.

Alex pulled his mask down, pushed the mouthpiece between his lips and breathed in. He could feel the oxygen and nitrogen mix rushing into the back of his throat. It had a slightly stale taste but he could tell it wasn't contaminated. He crossed his hands, holding his mask and respirator in place, then rolled over backwards. He felt his arm knock against something on the side as the world spun upside down. The water rushed up to greet him and then his vision was pulled apart like a curtain opening as he found himself plunging into the water.

He had left enough air in the BCD to keep him afloat and he made one last check, getting his bearings on the coastline so that he would know where to swim to and, more importantly, how to get back. At least the sea was still warm, although Alex knew that, with the sun rapidly setting, it wouldn't be for long. Cold is a dangerous enemy for the scuba-diver, sapping the strength and concentration. The deeper he went, the colder it would get. He couldn't afford to hang around.

He released the air from the BCD. At once the weights began to drag him down. The sea rose up and devoured him.

He swam down, squeezing his nose and blowing hard—equalizing—to stop the pain in his ears.

For the first time he was able to look around him. There was still enough sunlight to illuminate the sea and Alex caught his breath, marvelling at the astonishing beauty of the underwater world.

The water was dark blue and perfectly clear. There were a few coral heads dotted around him, the shapes and colours as alien as anything it's possible to find on the earth. He felt completely at peace, the sound of his own breathing echoing in his ears and each breath releasing a cascade of silver bubbles. With his arms loosely folded across his chest, Alex let his fins propel him towards the shore. He was fifteen metres down, about five metres above the sea bed. A family of brightly coloured groupers swam past him; fat lips, bulging eyes and strange, misshapen bodies. Hideous and beautiful at the same time. It had been a year since Alex had last gone diving and he wished he had time to enjoy this. He kicked forward. The groupers darted away, alarmed.

It didn't take him long to reach the edge of the cliff. The sea wall was of course much more than a wall; a seething mass of rock, coral, vegetation and fish life. A living thing. Huge gorgonian fans—leaves made of a thousand tiny bones—waved slowly from side to side. Clumps of coral exploded brilliantly all around him. A school of about a thousand tiny silver fish flickered past.

There was a slither of movement as a moray eel disappeared behind a rock. He glanced at the dive computer. At least it seemed to be working. It told him he had been down for seven minutes.

He had to find the entrance to the cave. That was why he was here. He forced himself to ignore the colours and sights of the underwater kingdom and concentrate on the rock face. The time he had spent taking his bearings before the dive paid off now. He knew more or less where the tower at the Casa de Oro stood in relation to the boat and swam in that direction, keeping the rock wall on his left. Something long and dark flashed past high above him. Alex saw it out of the corner of his eye but by the time he had turned his head it was gone. Was there a boat on the surface? Alex went down another couple of metres, searching for the cave.

In the end, it wasn't hard to find. The entrance was circular, like a gaping mouth. This impression was heightened when Alex swam closer and looked inside. The cave hadn't always been underwater and over a period of time—millions of years—stalactites and stalagmites had grown, needle-sharp spears that hung down from the ceiling and protruded up from the floor. As always, Alex was unable to remember which was which. But even from a distance there was something menacing about the place. It was like looking into the open mouth of some giant, undersea monster. He could almost imagine the stalactites and stalagmites biting down, the whole thing swallowing him up.

But he had to go in. The cave wasn't very deep and apart from the rock formations it was empty, with a wide, sandy floor. He was thankful for that. Swimming too far into an underwater cave, at sunset, on his own, really would have been madness. He could see the back wall from the entrance—and there were the first of the metal rungs! They were dark red now and covered in green slime and coral, but they were clearly man-made, disappearing up the far wall and presumably continuing all the way to the top of the Devil's Chimney. There was no sign of Turner or Troy. Had the two agents decided to climb up after all? Should Alex try to climb after them?

Alex was about to swim forward when there was another movement just outside his field of vision. Whatever he had seen before had come back, swimming the other way. Puzzled, he looked up. And froze. He actually felt the air stop somewhere at the back of his throat. The last of the bubbles chased each other up to the surface. Alex just hung there, fighting for control. He wanted to scream. But underwater, it isn't possible to scream.

He was looking at a great white shark, at least three metres long, circling slowly above him. The sight was so unreal, so utterly shocking, that at first Alex quite literally didn't believe his eyes.

It had to be an illusion, some sort of trick. The very fact that it was so close to him seemed impossible. He stared at the white underbelly, the two sets of fins, the down-turned crescent mouth with its jagged, razor-sharp teeth. And there were the deadly, round eyes, as black and as evil as anything on the planet. Had they seen him yet?

Alex forced himself to breathe. His heart was pounding. Not just his heart—his whole body. He could hear his breath, as if amplified, in his head. His legs hung limp beneath him, refusing to move. He was terrified. That was the simple truth. He had never been so scared in his life.

What did he know about sharks? Was the great white going to attack him? What could he do?

Desperately, Alex tried to draw on what little knowledge he had.

There were three hundred and fifty known species of shark but only very few of them were known to have attacked people. The great white—carcharodon carcharias—was definitely one of them. Not so good. But shark attacks were rare. Only about a hundred people were killed every year. More people died in car accidents. On the other hand, the waters around Cuba were notoriously dangerous. This was a single shark...

...still circling him, as if choosing its moment...

...and it might not have seen him. No. That wasn't possible. A shark's eyes are ten times more sensitive than a human being's. Even in pitch darkness it can see eight metres away. And anyway, it doesn't need eyes. It has receptors built into its snout which can detect even the tiniest electrical current. A beating heart, for example.

Alex tried to force himself to calm down. His own heart was generating minute amounts of electricity. His terror would guide the creature towards him. He had to relax!

What else? Don't splash. Don't make any sudden movements. Advice given to him by Ian Rider came echoing back across the years. A shark will be attracted to shiny metal objects, to brightly coloured clothes, and to fresh blood. Alex slowly turned his head. His oxygen cylinder had been painted black. His T-shirt was white. There was no blood. Was there?

He turned his hands over, examining himself. And then he saw it. Just above the wrist on his left arm. There was a small gash. He hadn't even noticed it, but now he remembered catching his wrist on the side of the boat as he fell backwards. A tiny amount of blood, brown rather than red, twisted upwards out of the wound.

Tiny, but enough. A shark can smell one drop of blood in twenty-five gallons of water. Who had taught him that? He had forgotten, but he knew it was true. The shark had smelled him...

...and was still smelling him, slowly closing in...

The circles were getting smaller. The shark's fins were down. Its back was arched. And it was moving in a strange, jerky pattern. The three textbook signs of an imminent attack. Alex knew that he had only seconds between life and death. Slowly, trying not to make any disturbance in the water, he reached down. The knife was still there, strapped to his leg, and he carefully unfastened it. The weapon would be tiny against the bulk of the great white and the blade would seem pathetic compared to those vicious teeth. But Alex felt better having it in his hand. It was something.

He looked around him. Apart from the cave itself, there was nowhere to hide—and the cave was useless. The mouth was too wide. If he went inside, the shark would simply follow him. And yet, if he made it to the ladder, he might be able to climb it. That would take him out of the water—

up the Devil's Chimney and onto dry land. True, he would surface in the middle of the Casa de Oro.

But no matter how bad General Sarov might be, he couldn't be worse than the shark.

He had made his decision. Slowly, keeping the shark in his sight, he began to move towards the cave's entrance. For a moment he thought the shark had lost interest in him. It seemed to be swimming away. But then he saw that he had been tricked. The creature turned and, as if fired from a gun, rushed through the water, heading straight for him. Alex dived down, air exploding from his lungs. There was a boulder to one side of the cave and he tried to wedge himself into a corner, putting it between himself and his attacker. It worked. The shark curved away. At that moment, Alex lunged forward with the knife. He felt his arm shudder as the blade cut into the thick hide just under the two front fins. As the shark flickered past, he saw that it was leaving a trail of what looked like brown smoke. Blood. But he knew that he had barely wounded it. He had managed a pinprick, nothing more. And he had probably angered it, making it all the more determined.

Worse, he was bleeding more himself. In his attempt to get out of the way, he had backed into the coral, which had cut his arms and legs. Alex felt no pain. That would come later. But now he really had done it. He had advertised himself: dinner, fresh and bleeding. It was a miracle that the great white hadn't been joined by a dozen friends.

He had to get into the cave. The shark was some distance away, out to sea. The cave entrance was just a few metres away to his left. Two or three kicks and he would be in—then through the stalactites and stalagmites and onto the ladder. Could he do it in time?

Alex kicked with all his strength. At the same time he was thrashing with his hands and cursed noiselessly as he accidentally dropped the knife. Well, it would do him no good anyway. He kicked a second time. The entrance to the cave loomed up in front of him. He was in front of it now but not inside...

...And he was too late! The shark came hurtling towards him. The eyes seemed to have grown bigger. The mouth was stretched open in a snarl that contained all the hatred in the world. Its mouth was gaping, the dreadful teeth slicing through the water. Alex jerked backwards, twisting his spine. The shark missed him by centimetres. He felt the surge of water pushing him away.

Now the shark was in the cave, but he wasn't. It was turning to attack again, and this time it wouldn't be confused by the rock wall and the boulders. This time Alex was right in its sights.

And then it happened. Alex heard a metallic buzz and, in front of his eyes, the stalagmites rose out of the floor and the stalactites dropped out of the ceiling, teeth that skewered the shark not once, but five or six times. Blood exploded into the water. Alex saw the dreadful eyes as its head whipped from side to side. He could almost imagine the creature howling in pain. It was completely trapped, as if in the jaws of a monster even more dreadful than itself. How had it happened? Alex hung in the water, shocked and uncomprehending. Slowly the blood cleared.

And he understood.

Turner and Troy had been wrong a second time. Sarov had known about the Devil's Chimney and he had made sure that nobody could reach it by swimming through the cave. The stalagmites and stalactites were fake. They were made of metal, not stone, and were mounted on some sort of hydraulic spring. Swimming into the cave, the shark must have activated an infra-red beam which in turn had triggered the ambush. Even as he watched, the deadly spears retracted, sliding back into the floor and ceiling. There was a hum and the body of the shark was sucked into the cave, disappearing into a trap. So the place even had its own disposal system! Alex was beginning to understand the nature of the man who lived in the Casa de Oro. Whatever else he might be, Sarov left nothing to chance.

And now he knew what had happened to the two CIA agents. Alex felt sick. All he wanted to do was get away. Not just out of the water but out of the country. He wished he had never come.

There was still a lot of blood in the water. Alex swam quickly, afraid that it would attract more sharks. But he paced himself, carefully measuring his ascent towards the surface. If a diver rises too quickly, nitrogen gets trapped in the bloodstream causing the painful and potentially lethal sickness known as the bends. That was the last thing Alex needed right now. He spent five minutes at three metres' depth—a final safety stop—then came

up for air. The whole world had changed while he had been underwater. The sun had rolled behind the horizon and the sky, the sea, the land, the very air itself had become suffused with the deepest crimson. He could see Garcia's boat, a dark shadow, about twenty metres away and swam over to it. Suddenly he was cold. His teeth were chattering—although they had probably been chattering from the moment he had seen the shark.

Alex reached the side of the boat. Garcia was still sitting on the deck with a cigarette between his lips but didn't offer to help him out.

"Thanks a bunch," Alex muttered.

He slipped off his BCD—the oxygen tank came with it—and heaved it onto the boat, then pulled himself out of the water. He winced. Out of the water, he could feel the wounds that the coral had inflicted on his limbs. But there was no time to do anything about that now. As soon as he was standing on the deck, he unhooked his weight belt and dumped it to one side along with his mask and snorkel. There was a towel in Turner's bag. He took it out and used it to rub himself dry. Then he went over to Garcia.

"We have to go," he said. "Turner and Troy are dead. The cave is a trap. Do you understand?"

You have to take me back to the hotel."

Garcia still said nothing. For the first time, Alex noticed something about the cigarette in the man's mouth. It wasn't actually lit. Suddenly uneasy, Alex reached out. Garcia fell forward.

There was a knife sticking out of his back.

Alex felt something hard touch him between his shoulder blades and a voice, which seemed to have trouble with the words it was saying, whispered from somewhere behind him.

"A little late to be out swimming, I think. I advise you now to keep very still."

A speedboat which had been lurking in the shadows on the other side of the diving boat roared to life, lights blazing. Alex stood where he was. Two more men climbed onboard, both of them speaking in Spanish. He just had time to glimpse the dark, grinning face of one of Sarov's macheteros before a sack was thrown over his head. Something touched his arm and he felt a sting and knew that he had just been injected with a hypodermic syringe. Almost at once, the strength went out of his legs and he would have collapsed but for the invisible hands that held him up.

And then he was lifted up and carried away. Alex began to wonder if it would have made any difference if the shark had reached him after all. The men who were carrying him off the boat were treating him like someone who was already dead.

THE CRUSHER

Alex couldn't move.

He was lying on his back on a hard, sticky surface. When he tried to raise his shoulders, he felt his T-shirt clinging to whatever it was underneath him. It was as if he had been glued into place.

Whatever had been injected into him had removed all power of movement from his arms and legs. The bag still covered his head, keeping him in darkness. He knew that he had been loaded into the speedboat and taken back to the coast. Some sort of van had met him and brought him here. He had heard footsteps and rough hands had grabbed him, carrying him like a sack of vegetables. He guessed that three or four men had been involved in the journey, but they had barely spoken. Once he had heard the same man who had spoken to him on the boat. He had muttered a couple of words in Spanish. But his voice was so indistinct, the words so garbled, that Alex had found it hard to understand what he was saying.

Fingers brushed against the side of his neck and suddenly the bag was removed. Alex blinked.

He was lying in a brightly lit warehouse or factory; the first thing he saw was the metal framework supporting the roof, with arc lamps hanging down. The walls were bare brick, whitewashed, the floor lined with terracotta tiles. There was machinery on both sides of him.

Most of it looked agricultural and a hundred years out of date. There were chains and buckets and a complicated pulley system that fed into a series of metal wheels that could have come out of a giant antique watch, and next to them, a pair of earthenware cauldrons. Alex twisted round and saw more cauldrons on the other side and, in the distance, some sort of filtration system with pipes leading everywhere. He realized now that he was lying on a long conveyor belt. He tried once again to get up or even roll off, but his body wouldn't obey him.

A man stepped into his line of vision.

Alex looked up into a pair of eyes that weren't actually quite a pair. They weren't positioned correctly in the man's face and one of them was bloodshot. Alex wondered if it could even see.

The man had been horribly injured at some time. He was bald on one side of his head, but not on the other. His mouth was slanting. His skin was dead. In a beauty contest, he wouldn't even come a close second to the great white shark.

There were a couple of dark, unsmiling workers standing behind him. They were shabbily dressed, with moustaches and bandanas. Neither of them spoke. They seemed keenly interested in what was about to happen.

"Your name?" The movements of the man's mouth didn't quite match what he was saying, so seeing him speak was a bit like watching a badly dubbed film.

"Alex Gardiner," Alex said.

"Your real name?"

"I just told you."

"You lied. Your real name is Alex Rider."

"Why ask if you think you know?"

The man nodded as if Alex had asked a fair question. "My name is Conrad," he said. "We have met before."

"Have we?" Alex tried to think. Then he remembered. The man he had seen limping down the boardwalk in Miami wearing sunglasses and a straw hat! It was the same man.

Conrad leaned forward. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"I'm on vacation with my mom and dad." Alex decided it was time to pretend he was just an ordinary fourteen year old. "Where are they?" he demanded. "Why have you brought me here?"

What happened to the man on the boat? I want to go home!"

"Where is your home?" Conrad asked.

"I live in LA. De Flores Street, west Hollywood."

"No." There was no doubt at all in Conrad's voice. "Your accent is very convincing, but you are not American. You are English. The people you came with were called Tom Turner and Belinda Troy. They were agents of the CIA. They are now dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You've got the wrong guy."

Conrad smiled. At least, one side of his mouth smiled. The other could only manage a slight twitch. "Lying to me is stupid and a waste of time. I have to know why you are here," he said. "It is an unusual experience to interrogate a child, but it is one I shall enjoy. You are the only one left. So tell me, Alex Rider, why did you come to Cayo Esqueleto? What were you planning to do?"

"I wasn't planning to do anything!" Despite everything, Alex thought it was worth one last try.

He was still speaking with an American accent. "My dad's a film producer. He's got nothing to do with the CIA. Who are you? And why have you brought me here?"

"I am losing my patience!" Conrad took a break, as if the effort of talking was too much for him.

"Tell me what I want to know."

"I'm on vacation!" Alex said. "I've already told you!"

"You have told me lies. Now you will tell me the truth."

Conrad leaned down and picked up a large metal box with two buttons—one red, one green—attached to a thick cable. He pressed the green button. At once, Alex felt a jolt underneath him.

An alarm bell rang. Somewhere in the distance there was a loud whine as a machine started up.

A few seconds later, the conveyor began to move.

Using all his strength, Alex fought against the drug that was in his system, forcing his head up so that he could look over his feet. What he saw sent a spasm of shock all the way through him. His head swam and he thought he was going to faint. The conveyor belt was carrying him towards two huge, spinning grindstones about seven metres away. They were so close to each other they were almost touching. There was one underneath and one on top. The belt stopped just at the point where they met. Alex was slumped helplessly on the belt. There was nothing he could do.

He was moving towards the grindstones at a rate of about ten centimetres a second. It would take him a little over a minute to reach them. When he did finally get there, he would be crushed.

That was the death that this man had arranged for him.

"Do you know how sugar was produced?" Conrad asked. "This place, where you are now, is a sugar mill. The machinery used to be steam-powered but now it is electric. The sugar cane was delivered here by the colonos—the farmers. It was shredded and then placed on a belt to be crushed. After that it was filtered. Water was allowed to evaporate. Then the remaining syrup was placed in cauldrons and heated so that it formed crystals." Conrad paused to draw breath.

"You, Alex, are at the beginning of that process. You are about to be fed into the crusher. I ask you to imagine the pain that lies ahead of you. Your toes will enter first. Then you will be sucked in one centimetre at a time. After your toes, your feet. Your legs and your knees. How much of you will pass through before you are allowed the comfort of death? Think about it! Whatever else it is, I can promise you that it will not be sweet."

Conrad raised the box with the two buttons. "Tell me what I want to know and I will press the red button. It stops the machine."

"You're wrong!" Alex shouted. "You can't do this!"

"I am doing this. And I am never wrong. Please, do not waste any more time. You have so little of it left..."

Alex lifted his head up again. The grindstones were getting closer with every second that passed.

He could feel their vibration, transmitted down the conveyor belt.

"How much did the agents know?" Conrad demanded. "Why were they here?"

Alex slumped back. The pounding of the two stones enveloped him. He looked past Conrad at the other two men. Would they let him do this? But their faces were impassive. "Please...!" he shouted. Then stopped himself. There was no mercy in this man. He had seen that at once. He gritted his teeth, biting back his fear. He wanted to cry. He could actually feel the tears in his eyes. This wasn't what he wanted. He had never asked to be a spy. Why should he be expected to die like one?

"You have perhaps fifty seconds more," Conrad said.

And that was when Alex made up his mind. There was no point in going silently to this bloody and unspeakable death. This wasn't a World War Two film with him as the hero. He was a schoolboy and everyone—Blunt, Mrs Jones, the CIA—had lied to him and played tricks on him to get him here. Anyway, Conrad already knew who he was. He had called him by his real name.

Conrad knew that Troy and Turner had been American spies. There was only one piece of information he could add. The CIA were looking for a nuclear bomb. And why shouldn't he tell Conrad that? Maybe it would be enough to stop him using it.

"They were searching for a bomb!" he cried out. "A nuclear bomb. They know Sarov bought uranium from the Salesman. They came here with a Geiger counter. They were going to break into the villa and look for the bomb."

"How did they know?"

"I don't know..."

"Thirty seconds."

The rumbling and pounding was louder than ever. Alex looked up and saw the stones less than three metres away. Air was rushing between them and flowing over him. He could feel the breeze cold on his skin. The fact that he wasn't tied down, that his arms and legs were free, only made it all the worse. He couldn't move! The drug had turned him into a piece of living meat on its way to the mincer. Perspiration flowed down the side of his face then followed the line of his jaw and curved behind his neck.

"It was Turner!" Alex yelled. "He found out from the Salesman. He was working undercover."

They found out that he'd sold you the uranium and they came here looking for the bomb."

"Did they know the purpose of the bomb?"

"No! I don't know. They didn't tell me. Now stop the machine and let me go."

Conrad considered for a moment. The box was still in his hand.

"No," he said. "I don't think so."

"What?" Alex screamed the single word. He could barely hear himself above the noise of the grindstones.

"You've been a bad boy," Conrad said. "And bad boys have to be punished."

"But you said—"

"I lied. Just like you. But of course I must kill you. You are of no further use..."

Alex went mad. He opened his mouth and screamed, trying to find the strength to separate himself from the conveyor belt. His brain knew what it wanted. His body refused to obey. It was useless. He jerked upwards. His feet were moving ever closer to the spinning stones. Conrad took a step back. He was going to watch as Alex was fed through the crusher. The two workers behind him would clear up when it was over.

"No!" Alex howled.

"Goodbye, Alex," Conrad said.

And then—another voice. In another language. One that Alex didn't understand.

Conrad said something. Alex could no longer hear. The man's lips moved but any sound was snatched away by the roar of the machine.

Alex's bare toes were being battered by the wind that was forced through the stones. They were five centimetres away from being crushed. Four centimetres, three centimetres, two centimetres...

There was a gunshot.

Sparks. The smell of smoke.

The grindstones were still spinning. But the conveyor belt had stopped. Alex's feet were jutting over the end of the belt. He could almost feel the spinning stone racing past his toes.

Then the voice came again, speaking now in English.

"My dear Alex. I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

Alex tried to reply with the worst swear-word he knew. But it wouldn't come. He couldn't even breathe.

With a sense of gratitude, he passed out.

"You will have to forgive Conrad. He is an excellent assistant and useful in so many ways. But he can also be a little ... over-enthusiastic."

Alex had woken up in the most magnificent bedroom he had ever seen. He was lying on a four poster bed opposite a floor-to-ceiling mirror in an ornate gold frame. All the furniture in the room was antique and wouldn't have been out of place in a museum. There was a painted chest at the foot of the bed, a massive wardrobe with elaborately carved doors, a chandelier with five curving arms. The shutters on the windows had been folded back to reveal a wrought iron balustrade looking out over a courtyard.

The man, who had introduced himself as General Alexei Sarov, was sitting on a chair next to the mirror, dressed in a dark suit. His legs were crossed. His back was completely straight. Alex examined the face with its grey hair and intelligent blue eyes. He recognized his voice from the sugar mill and knew—without knowing why—that it was the general who had saved him.

It was dark outside. Alex guessed it must be after midnight. Someone had dressed him in a white nightshirt that came down to his knees. He wondered how long he had been asleep. And how long the Russian had been waiting for him to wake up.

"Do you want something to eat?" That had been his first question.

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

"A drink then?"

"Some water..."

"I have some here."

The water came in a silver jug, served in a gleaming crystal glass. General Sarov poured it himself, then handed it to Alex. Alex reached out, grateful that the drug Conrad had pumped into him had worn off while he was asleep and that he could move his arms again. He sipped. The water was ice-cold. That was when Sarov began his apology, speaking in faultless English.

"Conrad had no orders to eliminate you. On the contrary, when I found out who you were, I very much wanted to meet you."

Alex wondered about that, but decided to ignore it for the moment. "How did you find out who I was?" he asked. There seemed no point in denying it now.

"We have a very sophisticated security system both here and in Havana." The general seemed uninterested in explaining more. "I'm afraid you've had a terrible ordeal."

"The people I came here with had a worse one."

Again the general raised a hand, brushing aside the details. "Your friends are dead. Were they your friends, Alex?" A brief pause. "I was of course perfectly well aware of the Devil's Chimney when I first moved into the Casa de Oro. I had a simple defence mechanism constructed. Diving is prohibited on this side of the island so when the occasional diver is foolish enough to enter the cave, he is only paying the price of his curiosity. They tell me that a shark was killed there..."

"It was a great white."

"You saw it?"

Alex said nothing. Sarov raised his hands, resting his chin on the tip of his fingers.

"You are as remarkable as I was told," he continued. "I have read your file, Alex. You have no parents. You were raised by an uncle who was himself a spy. You were trained by the Special Air Service, the SAS, and sent on your first mission in the south of England. And then, just a few weeks later, to France... Some would say that you have had the luck of the devil, but I do not personally believe in the devil—or in God, for that matter. But I believe in you, Alex. You are quite unique."

Alex was getting tired of all this flattery. And he couldn't help but feel that there was something sinister in it. "Why am I here?" he asked. "What do you want with me?"

"Why you are here should be self-evident," Sarov answered. "Conrad wanted to kill you. I prevented him. But I cannot allow you to return to the hotel or, indeed, to leave the island. You will have to consider yourself my prisoner, although if the Casa de Oro is a prison, I hope you will find it a comfortable one. As to what I want with you..." Sarov smiled to himself, his eyes suddenly distant. "It is late," he announced suddenly. "We can talk about that tomorrow."

He stood up.

"Is it true that you have a nuclear bomb?" Alex asked.

"Yes."

Part of the puzzle fell into place. "You bought uranium from the Salesman. But then you ordered Conrad to kill him! You blew up his boat!"

"That is correct."

So Alex had been right all along. He had seen Conrad in Miami. Conrad had put some sort of explosive device on the Mayfair Lady—and it was that, not the fire, that had caused the destruction and loss of life. Turner and Troy had accused him unfairly.

"The nuclear bomb..." Alex said. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Are you afraid?"

"I want to know."

The general considered. "I will tell you only this for now," he said. "I do not imagine that you know a great deal about my country, Alex. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as it was once called. The USSR. Russia, as it is today. I do not suppose these things are taught to you in your Western schools."

"I know that communism is finished, if that's what you mean," Alex said. "And it's a bit late for a history lesson."

"My country was once a world power," Sarov continued, ignoring him. "It was one of the most powerful nations on the earth. Who put the first man into space? We did! Who made the greatest advances in science and technology? Who was feared by the rest of the world?" He paused.

"You are right. Yes. Communism has been driven out. And what do you see in its place?" A flicker of anger appeared on his face—there only for a second and then it was gone. "Russia has become second-rate. There is no law and order. The prisons are empty and criminals control the streets. Millions of Russians are addicted to drugs. Millions more have AIDS. Women and children find work as prostitutes. And all this so that the people can eat McDonald's and buy Levi jeans and talk on their mobile telephones in Red Square!"

General Sarov walked over to the door.

"You ask me what I am going to do," he said. "I am going to turn back the page and undo the damage of the last thirty years. I am going to give my country back its pride and its position on the world stage. I am not an evil man, Alex. Whatever your superiors may have told you, my only wish is to stop the disease and to make the world a better place. I hope you can believe that.

It matters very much to me that you should come to see things my way."

"You have a nuclear bomb," Alex said, speaking slowly. "I don't understand. How is that going to help you achieve what you want?"

"That will be revealed to you ... in time. Let us have breakfast together at nine o'clock. Then I will show you around the estate."

General Sarov nodded and left the room.

Alex waited a minute before slipping out of bed. He looked out into the courtyard, then went and tried the door. He wasn't surprised by what he found. Sarov had described the Casa de Oro as a prison and he was right. There was no way Alex could climb down into the courtyard. And the bedroom door was locked.

THE HOUSE OF SLAVES

Alex was let out of the slave house the following morning. It seemed he was going to be allowed to spend the day at liberty in the Casa de Oro ... although not on his own. An armed guard had been assigned to watch over him. The guard was in his twenties, roughly shaven. He spoke no English.

He led Alex first to breakfast, which he had on his own in the kitchen, not in the dining room where he had eaten with Sarov. While Alex ate, he stood at the door, watching him nervously, as if he was a firework that had just failed to go off.

“Como se llama usted?” Alex asked. What’s your name?

“Juan...” The guard was reluctant to part with even that piece of information and answered the rest of Alex’s questions with monosyllables or silence.

It was another blazing hot day. The island seemed to be caught in the grip of an endless summer.

Alex finished his breakfast and went out into the main hall, where a few of the servants were, as ever, sweeping the floor or carrying supplies into the kitchen. The guards were still in place, up in the tower and around the perimeter. Alex made his way to the stables. He wondered if he would be allowed to go riding again and was pleasantly surprised when the guard brought out his grey for him, already saddled and prepared.

He set off a second time, with Juan just a few paces behind him on a chestnut mare. Alex didn’t particularly want to go riding. His thighs and backside were still sore from the day before. But he was interested in the perimeter fence that Sarov had mentioned. He had said that it was electrified. But even electric fences sometimes pass trees that can be climbed. And Alex had already decided that he had to find a way out.

He still had no idea what Sarov was planning. He had talked of changing the world. Making it better, stronger, healthier. He obviously thought of himself as some sort of hero—but he was a hero armed with a nuclear bomb. As he rode across the long grass, Alex wondered what Sarov intended to do. His first thought was that the Russian was going to blow up an American city.

Hadn’t America once been Russia’s greatest enemy? But that made no sense. Millions of people would die but it wouldn’t change the world. Certainly not for the better. Could his target be somewhere in Europe? Or was he perhaps going to use the bomb to blackmail world governments into giving him what he wanted? That seemed more likely. But at the same time, Alex doubted it. Whatever he was planning in some way involved the Russian president.

I am going to turn back the page and undo the damage of the last thirty years.

Suddenly Alex knew that despite their childhood friendship, Sarov hated the Russian president and wanted to take his place. That was what this was all about. A new Russia that would once again be a world power. With Sarov at its head.

And he was going to achieve it with a single nuclear blast.

Alex had to escape. He had to tell the CIA that Turner and Troy had been killed and that Sarov did have a bomb. Once they knew that, they would take over. And he wanted to put as many kilometres between himself and the Casa de Oro as he could. Sarov’s feelings for him, his desire to adopt him, bothered him as much as anything else. The old man was slightly mad. True, Sarov had saved his life. But it was Sarov who had put his life in danger in the first place. Despite the heat of the morning, Alex shivered. This whole adventure had turned into something that was rapidly spinning out of control.

They had reached the edge of the plantation, this time on the side away from the sea. And there, sure enough, was the fence—about five metres high, solid steel, with a smaller fence coming up to chest level on either side. There were large red signs with the single word PELIGRO printed in white letters. Even without the warning, the fence reeked of danger. There was a low humming that seemed to be coming from the ground. Alex noticed the charred and broken skeleton of a bird hanging on the wire. It must have flown into the fence and been killed instantly. Well, one thing was certain. He wasn’t going to climb over. The fence stretched through grassland with barely a single tree in sight.

Alex turned his horse towards the bottom end of the plantation and the entrance gate. Maybe he would be able to find a way through there. It took them about half an hour to reach it, riding at walking pace. The fence continued all the way. The entrance was marked by a crumbling stone guardhouse with no glass in the windows and a door hanging half off its hinges. There were two men inside and a third with a machine-gun standing beside a barrier. As Alex reached them, a car passed through. One of the limousines that he had seen the night before was leaving the compound. That gave him an idea. There was only one way out of here and that was in a car.

Presumably the president’s men would be making several journeys. That might give him a chance...

They rode back to the stables and dismounted. With Juan a few steps behind him, Alex walked back into the house. Almost at once he heard voices coming from the other side, and the splash of water. He crossed the inner courtyard past the fountain and went through an archway. There was a swimming pool on the other side, long and rectangular, with palm trees growing on both sides, casting natural shadows over the tables and sun-loungers. In the distance he saw a newly constructed tennis court. There were changing rooms, a sauna, an outside bar. From the back, the Casa de Oro looked like the playpen of a multi-millionaire.

Sarov was sitting at a table with the president, both of them holding drinks; water for Sarov, a cocktail for his guest. The president had changed into red shorts and a flowery short-sleeved shirt that hung loosely off his slight frame. There were four men standing close to him. It was obvious that they were the presidential bodyguard. The men were huge, dressed in black, with uniform sunglasses and a coil of wire disappearing into their ears. There was something almost ludicrous about the scene. The little man in his holiday clothes. The giant bodyguards. Alex looked at the pool. There were three strikingly attractive women sitting on the side, their feet dangling in the water. They were all in their twenties, wearing bikinis. They looked local. Alex was surprised to see them. He had thought Sarov too coldblooded to enjoy such company. Or had they been invited here for the president?

Alex wondered if he was meant to be in this part of the grounds and was about to leave when Sarov saw him and waved a hand, calling him over. With a sense of growing curiosity, Alex walked over. Sarov spoke quickly to the president, who nodded and smiled.

Good morning, Alex!" Sarov seemed unusually cheerful. "I understand you went out riding again. Please let me introduce you to my old friend, Boris Kiriyaenko, the president of Russia.

Boris, this is the boy I was telling you about."

The Russian president reached out and took Alex's hand. Alex could smell the alcohol on his breath. Whatever he was drinking in the cocktail, he'd had too much of it. "It is a pleasure," he said, in heavily accented English. He pointed a finger at Alex's face and broke into Russian.

Alex heard the name Vladimir mentioned twice.

Sarov answered briefly, then translated for Alex. "He says that you remind him of my son." He smiled. "Would you like to swim, Alex? You look as if you need it."

Alex glanced at the three girls. "Unusual lifeguards," he said.

Sarov laughed. "Some company for the president. He is, after all, on holiday, although unfortunately we do have a little work to do. Our local television station is naturally interested that we have such a distinguished visitor and Boris has agreed to give a brief interview. The crew will be here any minute now."

The president nodded but Alex wasn't sure if he'd understood.

"You can have the pool to yourself. We're going into Santiago after lunch, but I hope you'll join us for dinner, Alex. The chef has planned a special surprise for the main course."

There was a movement at the archway leading into the house. Conrad had appeared and with him was a short, serious-looking woman in a drab olive-green dress. There were two men behind her with cameras and lighting equipment.

"Ah! Here they are!" Sarov turned back to the president and suddenly Alex was forgotten.

He stripped to his swimming shorts and dived into the pool. After the long horse ride the water was cool and refreshing. He noticed the three girls watching him as he swam past. One of them winked at him and another giggled. Meanwhile, the camera crew was setting up its equipment in the shade of the palm trees. The Russian president waved a hand and one of his bodyguards brought over another cocktail. Alex was surprised that such an insignificant-looking man could be the head of a huge country. But then, he thought, most politicians are small and shabby, the sort of people who have been bullied at school. That's why they become politicians.

Alex put him out of his thoughts and concentrated on his swimming. In his mind he went over what Sarov had just said. They were driving into the city after lunch. That meant the cars would be leaving the compound. It was his only chance. Alex knew that there was no way off the island. The moment he was found missing, the alarm would be raised. Every guard at the airport would be on the lookout for him and he doubted he would be able to get on a boat. But if he could at least find a telephone that worked without an access code, he would be able to get in touch with the American mainland and they would send someone to pull him out.

He finished his eighth length and twisted round for a ninth. The Russian president was sitting in a chair, being wired for sound. Juan, Alex's personal guard, was waiting for him at the other end of the pool. Alex sighed. He was going to have to do something about Juan.

The television interview began. Sarov was watching carefully and, again, Alex got the impression that there was more to all this than met the eye.

He pulled himself out of the pool and went back to his quarters to get changed.

Alex wore another pair of shorts and an aertex shirt, both of them chosen because they were neutral colours, allowing him to blend in with the background. In his pocket he had a stick of the bubblegum that Smithers had given him. If everything went according to plan, he was going to need it.

Juan was standing outside the room. Alex was suddenly nervous about what he was going to do.

After all, Sarov had already warned him what would happen if he tried to escape. He would be shot—or at the very least, whipped. But then he thought of the nuclear bomb. Sarov had to be stopped. His mind was made up.

He stopped suddenly and groaned. His whole face contorted with pain and he staggered to one side, putting out a hand to stop himself falling. Juan started forward, entering the room with a look of concern. At that moment, Alex straightened up. His foot shot out in a perfectly timed roundhouse kick that slammed into the soft flesh of the man's stomach. Juan didn't even cry out.

With all the breath knocked out of him, he crumpled to the ground and lay still. Not for the first time, Alex thanked the five years' training that had given him a black belt—first grade Dan—in karate. Now he moved fast. He took the sheet off the bed and tore it into strips. He tied the man's hands and feet, then gagged him. Finally, he slipped out of the room, locking it behind him. It would be hours before the guard was found. By that time he would be away.

He came out of the barracon. The black limousines were still parked in front of the villa, waiting for the president and his men to leave. There was nobody in sight. Alex sprinted forward. Sarov had allowed him to wander around the grounds of the plantation, but only if he was accompanied. If anyone saw him without his guard, they might guess what had happened. He reached the edge of the house and stopped, breathless, his back against the wall. Even the short run had made him sweat in the intense heat of the afternoon. He examined the cars. There were three of them. The one that had left earlier that morning still hadn't come back. The question was, when the president went into Santiago, which one would he take? Or would all three accompany him?

Alex was about to dart forward when he heard footsteps approaching round the side of the house.

It was either guards or workers—the moment they turned the corner, they would see him. There was a narrow door to one side. He hadn't noticed it before. He fumbled for the handle.

Fortunately, it wasn't locked. Just as two men in military dress appeared a few metres away, both armed, he slipped inside, closing the door behind him.

The chill of an air-conditioning system brushed over him. He looked around. He was in a part of the house that looked completely different to the rest. Here, the wooden floors and antique furniture had given way to a hi-tech, modern look. Halogen lighting led the way down a short corridor with glass doors on either side. Intrigued, Alex crept forward. He came to the first door and looked inside.

There were two technicians sitting gazing at a bank of TV screens. The room wasn't large and looked like an editing suite in a television studio. Alex eased the door open. There was no chance that the technicians would hear him. They were both wearing headphones, plugged into the machinery in front of them. Alex looked at the screens.

Every room in the main house was under observation. He recognized at once the room in which he had woken up. There was the kitchen, the dining room, the main courtyard with two of the president's men strolling across. He turned to another screen and stared. He was watching himself swimming lengths in the pool. That had been recorded too. And there was Sarov, sitting with his glass of water while, on the screen next to him, the president gave his interview to the crew that Alex had seen arrive.

It took Alex a moment to work out exactly what he was seeing. Everything was being recorded and edited. That was what the two technicians were doing now. The arrival of Boris Kiriyyenko was playing on one screen. Next to it, the president emptied a glass of brandy, presumably the night before. On a third screen, the girls that Alex had seen at the swimming pool were introduced to him. They were simpering and smiling in low-cut dresses that left little to the imagination. Had he taken them to his room? If so, that would doubtless have been recorded too.

An image flickered. And there was the president giving his interview. One of the technicians must have been given the footage taken by the woman in the drab green dress. Kiriyyenko was talking directly to the camera in the manner of a thousand politicians on Newsnight or Panorama.

Totally serious—although he looked a little foolish in his flowery shirt. On the screen next to this one, the same Kiriyyenko swam in the pool with one of the girls.

What did it all mean? Why did Sarov want this? Was the Casa de Oro nothing more than an elaborate, honeyed trap into which the president of Russia had unwittingly strayed?

Alex couldn't stay there any longer. Everything he saw made it more urgent for him to get out and warn the Americans. He was afraid he was going to miss the departure of the cars—and there wouldn't be a second chance.

He opened the door again and looked outside. The cars were still there but the guards had gone.

He looked at his watch. It was two o'clock. If lunch hadn't finished already, it would do so shortly.

It had to be now! He ran forward to the nearest car and felt for the boot release. Was it going to be locked? His thumb found the silver button and pressed and, to his relief, the boot opened. It was a big car with plenty of room. He threw himself inside, then reached up and pulled the lid back down, locking it. At once he was trapped in pitch darkness and he had to force himself not to panic. It was like being buried alive. He tried to relax. This was going to work. Provided nobody opened the boot to put luggage in, he wouldn't be seen. The limousine would drive him out of the plantation and when they were parked in Santiago, he would make his escape.

Of course, the most difficult part was still to come. Alex couldn't see out of the car. He couldn't even see his own hand in front of his face. He was totally blind. He would simply have to guess when the driver and his passengers had gone and hope for the best. It was also impossible to open the boot from the inside. It was for this reason that Alex had brought along the gum. He would choose the moment and use the gum to blow his way out. With a bit of luck, he would slip away into the crowd before anyone realized what had happened.

But already he was wondering if this had been a good idea. It was hot inside the boot. He could imagine the sun beating down on the car, and realized that he had locked himself into an oven.

Sweat was oozing out of every pore. His clothes were already sodden and he could hear it dripping onto the metal surface beneath him. How much air was there in the trunk? If Sarov didn't make a move soon, he'd have to blow the car open while it was still in the compound and face the consequences.

He fought down the panic and tried to breathe as shallowly as he could. His heart was thudding in his ears. He could feel the muscle hard at work in his chest as it pumped blood around his body. The veins in his neck and pulses were beating in rhythm. He wanted to stretch his legs but he didn't dare move in case he rocked the car. The minutes ticked by—and then he heard voices.

There was the echoing clunk of a car door opening and the whole vehicle shifted from side to side as its passengers got in. Curled up in a foetal position, Alex waited for the boot to be thrown open, but it seemed that the president, or whoever was in the limousine, had decided not to bring any baggage. The car engine started up. Alex felt the vibrations and then, suddenly, they were moving, with Alex being jolted up and down as they started over the makeshift road.

After only about a minute they began to slow down again and Alex knew that they must be approaching the gate and checkpoint. That was another worry. Would the guards search the car?

But he had already seen one limousine leave the villa that morning, and although the guards had been there he hadn't seen anyone open the boot. The car had stopped. Alex didn't move.

Everything was black. He heard voices as if in the far distance. Somebody shouted something but he couldn't make out a word they said. The car seemed to have been there for ever. Why was it taking so long? Get on with it! Alex was finding it harder and harder to breathe. It felt as if the air was already running out.

And then the car started forward and he let out a sigh of relief. He could imagine the barrier rising to let them through. The Casa de Oro would be behind them now. How far was it to Santiago? How would he know for sure when they were there?

The car stopped again.

The boot opened.

Cruel sunlight came rushing in. Alex blinked, putting a hand up to protect himself.

"Get out!" a voice said, in English.

Alex climbed out, soaking wet with his own perspiration. Sarov was standing in front of him.

Conrad was next to him, holding an automatic pistol, not even trying to hide the pleasure in his eyes. Alex looked around. The car hadn't even left the compound. It had simply rolled forward and turned round. That had been the movement he had felt. There were two guards watching him, their faces blank. One of them was holding a device that looked a little like a megaphone, the sort teachers used at sports days. It was connected by a long wire to a box just inside the building.

"If you had wanted to visit Santiago, you had only to ask," Sarov said. "But I don't think you wanted to visit the city. I think you were running away."

Alex said nothing.

"Where is Juan?" Sarov asked.

Alex still didn't speak.

Sarov gazed at the boy. He seemed pained, as if he didn't understand why Alex had disobeyed him and didn't know quite what to do. "You disappoint me, Alex," he said, at length. "You were down at the cave. You saw the extent of my security arrangements there. Did you really think for a single minute that I would allow a car to drive in or out of this compound without knowing exactly who or what was inside?"

He suddenly reached out and took the megaphone device from the guard. He pointed it at Alex's chest and pressed a button. At once, Alex heard a thumping sound that echoed through the air. It took him a second or two to realize that it was his own heart, amplified and transmitted out of speaker system hidden somewhere inside the guard house.

"The car was scanned at the barrier," Sarov explained. "Every car is scanned at the barrier, using the machine I am holding now. A sophisticated sensor. This is what the guard heard. You can hear it now."

Thud ... thud ... thud...

Alex listened to his own heart.

Sarov was suddenly angry. Nothing in his face had changed, but his pale blue eyes had turned to ice and there was a dreadful deadness about him, as if his own life had suddenly been drained away. "Do you not remember what I told you?" he whispered. "If you tried to escape, you would be shot. Conrad very much wishes to shoot you. He believes I am a fool to have you here as my guest. He is right."

Conrad stepped forward, the gun raised.

Thud ... thud ... thud ... thud...

Alex's heart was the animal inside him, beyond his control, responding to the fear he felt. There was nothing he could do to hide it. The heart was beating louder and faster, echoing out of the speakers.

"I don't understand you, Alex. Have you no idea what I'm offering you? Did you not hear a word that I said? I offer you my protection and you make an enemy of me! I want you to be my son, but you force me to destroy you instead."

Conrad touched the gun against Alex's heart.

Thudthudthudthudthudthudthudthud...

"Listen to the sound of your own terror. Do you hear it? And when you hear silence—it could be just a few seconds from now—that is when you will know you have died."

Conrad's finger tightened on the trigger.

Then Sarov turned off the sensor.

The heartbeat stopped.

Alex felt as if he had been shot. The sudden silence hit him like a hammer blow. Like a bullet from a gun. He fell to his knees, hollowed out, barely able to breathe. He knelt there in the dust, his hands at his sides. He no longer had the strength to stand up. Sarov looked at him and now there was only sadness in his face.

"He has learned his lesson," he said. "Take him back to his room."

He put down the sensor and, turning his back on the still kneeling boy, slowly climbed back into the car.

THE NUCLEAR DUSTBIN

At seven o'clock that evening, the door of Alex's cell opened and Conrad stood there, wearing a suit and tie. The smart clothes made his half-bald head, ruined face and red, twitching eye even uglier than usual. He reminded Alex of an expensive Guy Fawkes on bonfire night.

"You are invited to dinner," Conrad said.

"No thanks, Conrad," Alex replied. "I'm not hungry."

"The invitation is not one you may refuse." He tilted a hand to look at his watch. The hand had been inaccurately joined to the wrist. He had to move it a long way to see the watch face. "You have five minutes," he said. "You are expected to dress formally."

"I'm afraid I left my dinner jacket in England."

Conrad ignored him and closed the door.

Alex swung his legs off the bunk where he had been lying. He had been in the cell ever since his capture at the gate, vaguely wondering what was going to happen next. An invitation to dinner had been the last thing he'd expected. There had been no sign of Juan when he got back.

Presumably the young guard had been reprimanded for his failure to watch over Alex and sent home. Or shot. Alex was beginning to realize that the people at the Casa de Oro meant business.

He had no idea what Sarov had in mind for him this evening but he knew that the last time they had met, Alex had only just managed to escape with his life. He resembled the sixteen-year-old Vladimir, Sarov's lost son. Sarov must still have some fantasy about adopting him. Otherwise, he would now be dead.

He decided that, all in all, it would be wise to play along with this invitation to dinner. At the very least it might allow him to find out a little more about what was going on. Would the meal be filmed, he wondered? And if so, to what use would the film be put? Alex pulled a clean shirt and a pair of black Evisu trousers out of his case. He remembered that the mad headmaster, Dr Grief, had used hidden cameras at the Point Blanc academy to spy on the boys who were there.

But this was different. The film that he had seen in the editing suite was being cut, pieced together, manipulated. It was going to be used for something. But what?

Conrad returned exactly five minutes later. Alex was ready for him. Once again he was escorted out of the slave house and up the steps to the main house. Inside, he heard the sound of classical music. He reached the courtyard and saw a trio—two elderly violinists and a plump lady with a cello—playing what sounded like Bach, the fountain tinkling softly behind them. There were about a dozen people gathered there, drinking champagne and eating canapes which were being carried round on silver trays by white-aproned waitresses. The four bodyguards were standing together in a tight, watchful circle. Another six men from the Russian delegation were chatting to the girls from the swimming pool, who glittered in sequins and jewellery.

The president himself was talking to Sarov, a glass in one hand and a huge cigar in the other.

Sarov said something and he laughed out loud, smoke billowing from his lips. Sarov noticed Alex arrive and smiled.

"Ah, Alex! There you are! What will you have to drink?"

It seemed that the events of the afternoon had been forgotten. At least, they weren't to be mentioned again. Alex asked for a fresh orange juice and it was brought at once.

"I'm glad you're here, Alex," Sarov said. "I didn't want to start without you."

Alex remembered something Sarov had said at the swimming pool. Something about a surprise.

He was beginning to have bad feelings about this dinner, but without knowing why.

The trio finished a piece of music and there was a light smattering of applause. Then a gong sounded and the guests moved into the dining room. This was the same room where Alex and Sarov had eaten breakfast, but it had been transformed for the banquet. The glasses were crystal, the plates brilliant white porcelain, the knives and forks polished till they gleamed. The tablecloth, also white, looked brand new. There were thirteen places for dinner—six on each side and one at the head. Alex noted the number with a further sense of unease. Thirteen for dinner.

Unlucky.

Everyone took their places at the table. Sarov had placed himself at the head, with Alex on one side of him, Kiriyyenko on the other. The doors opened and the waitresses came back in, this time with bowls brimming over with tiny black eggs which Alex recognized as caviar. Presumably Sarov had it directly imported from the Black Sea—it must have been worth many thousands of pounds. Russians traditionally drink vodka with caviar, and as the bowls were positioned around the table, the guests were each given a small tumbler filled to the brim.

Then Sarov stood up.

"My friends," he began. "I hope you will forgive me if I address you in English. There is unfortunately one guest at this table who has yet to learn our glorious language."

There were smiles around the table and a few heads nodded in Alex's direction. Alex looked down at the tablecloth, unsure how to respond.

"This is for me a night of great significance. What can I tell you about Boris Nikita Kiriyyenko?"

He has been my closest and dearest friend for more than fifty years! It is strange to think that I can still remember him as a child who teased animals, who cried when there was a fight, and who never told the truth." Alex glanced at Kiriyyenko. The president was frowning. Sarov was

presumably joking, but the joke was failed to amuse his guest. "It is even harder to believe this is the same man who has been entrusted with the privilege, the sacred honour, of leading our great country in these difficult times. Well, Boris has come here for a holiday. I'm sure he needs one after so much hard work. And that is the toast that I wish to make tonight. To his holiday! I hope that it will be longer and more memorable than he ever expected."

There was a brief silence. Alex could see that the guests were puzzled. Perhaps they'd had difficulty following Sarov's English. But he suspected it was what he had said that had thrown them, not how he had said it. They had come expecting a good dinner, but Sarov seemed to be insulting the president of Russia!

"Alexei, my old friend!" the president said. Boris had decided that it was a joke. He smiled and continued in his thickly accented English. "Why do you not join us?" he asked.

"You know that I never drink spirits," Sarov replied. "And I hope you will agree that at fourteen, my son is a little too young for vodka."

"I drank my first vodka aged twelve!" the president muttered.

Somehow, Alex wasn't surprised.

Kiriyenko lifted his glass. "Na zdarovie!" he said. They were about the only words of Russian that Alex understood. Your health!

"Na zdarovie!" Everyone round the table chorused the toast.

As one, they drank, throwing back the chilled vodka, as is traditional, in a single gulp.

Sarov turned to Alex. "Now it begins," he said quietly.

One of the bodyguards was the first to react. He had been reaching out to help himself to caviar when suddenly his hands jerked, dropping his fork and plate with a crash. Every head turned towards him. A second later, at the other end of the table, one of the other men threw himself forward, head-first, onto the table, his chair capsizing underneath him. As Alex watched, his eyes wide with horror, every person at the table began to react in the same way. One of them fell backwards, dragging the tablecloth with him, glasses and cutlery cascading into his lap. Several of them simply slumped where they sat. Another of the bodyguards managed to get to his feet and was scrabbling for a gun underneath his jacket, but then his eyes glazed and he collapsed.

Boris Kiriyenko was the last to go. He was standing, swaying on his feet like a wounded bull.

His fist was clenched as if he knew he had been betrayed and wanted to strike out at the man who had done it. Then he sat down heavily. His chair tilted and he was thrown onto the floor.

Sarov muttered a few words in Russian.

"What have you done?" Alex gasped. "Are they...?"

"They are unconscious, not dead," Sarov said. "They will, of course, have to be killed. But not yet."

"What are you planning?" Alex demanded. "What is it you're going to do?"

"We have a long journey," Sarov said. "I'll tell you on the way."

The entire compound was lit up. Men—guards and macheteros—were running everywhere. Alex was still dressed in the clothes he had worn for dinner. Sarov had changed into dark green military dress, this time without his medals. One of the black limousines was waiting. Conrad had driven up at the wheel of an army truck. As Alex watched, two more guards appeared at the main entrance of the Casa de Oro and began to walk down the wide steps. They were moving forward slowly, carrying something between them. The moment they appeared, everyone around them stopped.

It was a large silver chest about the size of a school trunk. Alex could just see that the top was flat metal, but that it had a number of switches and dials as well as some sort of slot device built into the side. Sarov watched while it was carried over and loaded into the truck. All the other men did the same, as if the two guards had just come out of a church and this was an an effigy of a saint. Alex shuddered. He knew exactly what he was looking at and didn't need the Geiger counter to confirm it.

This was the nuclear bomb.

"Alex?" Sarov was holding the car door open for him. Dazed, Alex got in. He knew that he had reached the end. Sarov had shown his hand and put into action a series of events from which there could be no going back. And yet even now, at this late stage, he had no idea what the general intended to do.

Sarov sat next to him. A driver got in and they moved off, Conrad following behind in the truck.

At the very last moment, as they passed through the barrier, Sarov glanced back, very briefly.

Alex saw the look in his eyes and knew that he had no intention ever to return. There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask, but he said nothing. This wasn't the time. Sarov was sitting quietly, his hands on his knees. But even he couldn't disguise the tension. Years of planning must have been building up to this.

They drove down darkened roads with just occasional flickers of light showing that the island was actually inhabited. No other cars came their way. After about ten minutes, they began to pass buildings. Looking out of the window, Alex saw men and women sitting in front of their houses, drinking rum, playing cards, smoking cigarettes or cigars beneath the night sky. They were on the outskirts of Santiago and suddenly they turned down a road that Alex recognized. He had taken it on the way in. They were going to the airport.

This time there was no security, no queues for passport control. Sarov didn't even have to enter the main terminal building. Two airport guards were waiting for him at a gate which was opened to allow him to drive straight onto the runway. The truck followed. Alex looked over the driver's shoulder and saw a plane, a Lear jet, parked on its own. They stopped.

"Out," Sarov said.

There was a breeze blowing across the airport runway, carrying with it the smell of aviation fuel.

Alex stood on the tarmac, watching as the silver chest was loaded onto the plane, Conrad shouting instructions. He found it hard to believe that such an ordinary-looking thing could be capable of destruction on a massive scale. He remembered films he had seen. Flames and gale force winds rushing through whole cities, ripping them apart. Buildings crumbling. People turned to ashes in an instant. Cars and buses flicked like toys into oblivion. How could such a terrible bomb with so much power be so small? Conrad closed the cargo door himself. He turned to Sarov and nodded. Sarov gestured. Unwillingly, Alex walked forward and climbed the steps into the plane. Sarov was right behind him. Conrad and the two men who had been carrying the bomb followed. The door of the plane was closed and sealed.

Alex found himself in a luxurious compartment that was like no plane he had ever been in. There were only a dozen seats, each one upholstered in leather. The compartment was long and thickly carpeted, with a well stocked bar, a kitchen and, in front of the cockpit, a seventy centimetre plasma television screen. Alex didn't ask what film they would be showing. He chose a window seat—but then they were all window seats. Sarov sat across the aisle from him. Conrad was one seat behind Sarov. The two guards sat at the far end of the compartment. Alex wondered why they were making the journey. To keep an eye on him?

And what journey, exactly, were they making? Were they crossing into America or travelling across the Atlantic?

Sarov must have been reading his mind. "I will explain to you in a moment," he said. "As soon as we are in the air."

In fact, it was about fifteen minutes before the Lear jet took off down the runway and lifted effortlessly off the ground. The cabin lights dimmed for take-off but as soon as they had reached thirty thousand feet, they came back on. The guards got up and began to serve hot tea which had been brewing in an urn in the kitchen. Sarov allowed himself a brief smile. He pressed a button in the arm of his chair and swung round so that he now faced Alex.

"You may be wondering why I decided not to kill you," he began. "This afternoon, when I found you in the car... I came so close. Conrad is still annoyed with me. He believes I am making a mistake. He does not understand me. But I will tell you why you are still alive, Alex. You are working for British intelligence. You are a spy. And you were only doing your job. I admire that, and this is the reason why I have forgiven you. You are loyal to your country even as I am loyal to mine. My son Vladimir died for his country. I am proud that you were prepared to do the same for yours."

Alex took this in. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"We are going to Russia. To be precise, we are going to Murmansk, which is a port on the Kola Peninsula."

Murmansk! Alex tried to remember if he had heard the name before. It did seem familiar. Had he heard it in a news bulletin, or perhaps in a lesson at school? A port in Russia! But why would they be going there ... and carrying a nuclear bomb?

"You might like to know our flight path," Sarov continued. "We are crossing the Atlantic by the northern route. This involves flying over the Arctic Circle. In essence, we are taking a short cut, following the curvature of the earth. We will have to make two stops to refuel. One in Gander, in northern Canada. The other in the British Isles, in Edinburgh." Sarov must have seen the hopeful expression in Alex's eyes. He went on. "Yes. You will be home for an hour or two tomorrow.

But please don't get any ideas. You will not be permitted to leave the plane."

"Will it really take so long to get there?" Alex asked.

"With the first stop and the time difference ... yes. We may also have to engage in some diplomatic pleasantries with both the Canadian and the British authorities. This is Kiriyenko's private plane. We have filed our flight plan with Euro Control and of course they recognized our serial number. They believe the president is onboard. I would imagine that the Canadian and the British governments might be keen to offer us hospitality."

"Who's flying the plane?"

"Kiriyenko's pilot. He is, however, loyal to me. A great many ordinary Russian people believe in me, Alex. They have seen the future ... my future. They prefer it to the version they have been offered by others."

"You still haven't told me what that future is. Why are we flying to Murmansk?"

"I will tell you now. And then we must both sleep. We have a long night ahead."

Sarov crossed his legs. There was a light directly above him and it beamed down, casting his eyes and mouth into shadow. He seemed at that moment both very old and very young. There was no expression in his face at all.

"Murmansk," he began, "is home to Russia's northern fleet of submarines. Or it was. It is now, quite simply, the world's biggest nuclear dustbin. The end of Russia as a world power has led to the rapid collapse of its army, air force and navy. I have already tried to explain to you what has happened to my country in the past thirty years. The way it has been allowed to fall apart, with poverty, crime and corruption sucking the people dry. Well, that process of decay can be seen most starkly in Murmansk.

"A fleet of nuclear submarines is moored there. I say „moored“ but I mean „abandoned“. One of them, the Lepse is more than forty years old and contains six hundred and forty-two bundles of fuel rods. These submarines have been left to rot and they are falling apart. Nobody cares.

Nobody can find the money to do anything about them. It is a well documented fact, Alex, that these old submarines represent the single biggest threat to the world today. There are one hundred of them! I am talking about one fifth of the world's nuclear fuel. One hundred ticking time bombs, waiting to go off. An accident waiting to happen. An accident I have decided to arrange."

Alex opened his mouth to break in, but Sarov held up a hand for silence.

"Let me explain to you what would happen if just one of those submarines were to blow up," he continued. "First of all, a huge number of Russians in the Kola Peninsular and the north would be killed. Many more people would die in the neighbouring countries of Norway and Finland.

"Unusually for this time of year, the wind is blowing to the west, so the nuclear fallout would travel over Europe to your country. It is very possible that London would become uninhabitable.

Over the years, thousands more people would fall ill and die slow, painful deaths.”

“So why do it?” Alex shouted. “Why cause the explosion? What good will it do?”

“I am, if you like, giving the world a wake-up call,” Sarov explained. “Tomorrow night I will land in Murmansk and I will place the bomb that you have seen amongst the submarines.” He reached into his top pocket and took out a small plastic card. It had a magnetic stripe down one side like a credit card. “This is the key that will detonate the bomb,” he said. “All the codes and information required are contained in the magnetic strip. All I have to do is insert the card into the bomb. At the time of the explosion itself, I will be on my way south to Moscow, out of harm’s way.

“The explosion will be felt in every country in the world. You can imagine the shock and the outrage that it will create. And nobody will know that it was caused by a bomb that was deliberately carried to Murmansk. They will believe that it was one of the submarines. The Lepse, perhaps, or one of the others. I’ve already said—it was an accident waiting to happen.

And when it does happen, nobody will begin to suspect the truth.”

“Yes they will!” Alex said. “The CIA know you bought uranium. They’ll find out their agents are dead—”

“Nobody will believe the CIA. Nobody ever believes the CIA. And anyway, by the time they have assembled their evidence against me, it will be too late.”

“I don’t understand!” Alex exclaimed. “You’ve already said you’ll kill thousands of your own people. What’s the point?”

“You are young. You know nothing of my people. But listen to me, Alex, and I will explain.

When this disaster happens, the whole world will unite in its condemnation of Russia. We will be hated. And the Russian people will be ashamed. If only we had been less careless, less stupid, less poor, less corrupt. If only we were still the super power we had once been. And it is at this moment that everyone—in Russia and in the world—will look to Boris Kiriyeenko for leadership.

The Russian president! And what will they see?”

“You made a film of him...” Alex muttered.

“We will release the film that shows him drunk beside the swimming pool. In his red shorts and flowered shirt. Playing with three half-naked women young enough to be his daughters! And we have interviewed him. We’ll release that too.”

“You’ve edited the interview!”

“Exactly.” Sarov nodded, his eyes catching the light. “Our interviewer asked him about a train strike in Moscow and Kiriyeenko, who was already half drunk, replied: „This is my holiday. I’m too busy to deal with that.” We will change the question. „What are you going to do about the accident in Murmansk?” And Kiriyeenko will reply—”

“—„This is my holiday. I’m too busy to deal with that.” ” Alex finished the sentence.

“The Russian people will see Kiriyeenko for the weak, drunken imbecile that he is. They will very quickly blame him for the disaster at Murmansk—and with good reason. The northern fleet was once the pride of the whole nation. How could it have been allowed to become a rusting, leaking, lethal nuclear dump?”

The plane droned on. Conrad was listening intently to what Sarov was saying, his head balancing unevenly on his neck. The two guards at the back had gone to sleep.

“You said you would be in Moscow,” Alex muttered.

“It will take less than twenty-four hours for the government to be swept out of power,” Sarov replied. “There will be riots in the streets. Many Russians believe that life was better—much better—in the old days. They still believe in communism. Well, now their anger will be heard. It will be unstoppable. And I will be there to harness it, to use it to take power. I have followers who are waiting for it to happen. Before the nuclear cloud has settled, I will have total control of the country. And that is just the beginning, Alex. I will rebuild the Berlin Wall. There will be new wars. I will not rest until my kind of government, communist government, is the single dominant power in the world.”

There was a long silence.

“You’re prepared to kill millions of people to achieve this?” Alex asked.

Sarov shrugged. “Millions of people are dying in Russia right now. They can’t afford food. They can’t afford medicine—”

“And what happens to me?”

“I’ve already answered that question, Alex. I don’t believe it was a coincidence that you turned up the way you did. I believe it was meant to happen. I was never meant to do this on my own.

You will be with me tomorrow and when the bomb is primed and ready, we will leave together.

First Murmansk, then Moscow. Don’t you see what I’m offering you? You are not just going to be my son. You are going to have power, Alex. You are going to be one of the most powerful people in the world.”

The plane had already reached the coast of America and turned, beginning its journey north.

Alex sank back in his seat, his head spinning. Absent-mindedly, he allowed his hand to slip into his trouser pocket. He had managed to bring one stick of the M16 bubblegum with him. He also had the little figurine that was actually a stun grenade.

He closed his eyes and tried to work out what he was going to do.

SECURITY NIGHTMARE

Hours spent in a strange twilight that was neither night nor day. Trapped on the roof of the world, totally still yet hurtling ever further. Alex slept for the first part of the journey, knowing that he was tired and that he would need his strength. He had accepted what he had to do. Before, when they had been on Skeleton Key, a small part of him had been tempted to sit back and do nothing. After all, he had never asked to be there. All this had nothing to do with him.

But now everything had changed. He could see the nuclear blast in the Kola Peninsular. It was already there, in his imagination. Thousands of people would die instantly, tens of thousands later as the deadly radioactive particles spread over Europe. Britain would be one of the countries that would suffer. Alex had to stop it happening. He no longer had any choice.

It was going to be much more difficult this time. Sarov might have forgiven him for his failed escape attempt in the car but Alex knew he would no longer trust him. And he couldn't afford to make another mistake. If he was caught trying to escape a second time, there would be no reprieve, no mercy. In his heart, Alex seriously doubted that he would be able to slip past the Russian general or his twisted companion. Sarov was completely alert, as if he had been sitting there for ten minutes, not ten hours. Conrad was still watching him too. He was sitting quietly on the other side of the plane, a cat waiting for a mouse, his red eye blinking in the half light.

And yet...

Alex had the two gadgets Smithers had given him. And they were going to be landing in Britain!

Just the thought of being in his own country, surrounded by people who spoke his language, gave Alex new strength. He had a plan and it would work. It had to.

He must have slept through the refuelling stop at Gander and several hours of the flight because the next thing he knew, it was light outside and the two guards were clearing away a breakfast of raw fruit and yoghurt that had been prepared in the Lear jet's miniature kitchen. He looked out of the window. All he could see was cloud.

Sarov noticed that he had woken up. "Alex! Are you hungry?"

"No, thank you."

"Still, you must have something to drink. It's very easy to dehydrate on these long journeys." He spoke a few words of Russian to one of the guards, who disappeared and came back with a glass of grapefruit juice. Alex hesitated before bringing it to his lips, remembering what had happened to Kiriyenko. Sarov smiled. "You don't need to worry," he said. "It's just grapefruit juice. No added ingredients."

Alex drank. The juice was cold and refreshing after his long sleep.

"We will be landing in Edinburgh in about thirty minutes," Sarov told him. "We're already in British airspace. How does it feel to be home?"

"If you'd like to drop me, I can get a train to London."

Sarov shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

A few minutes later they began their descent. The pilot had been in radio communication with the airport and had confirmed that this was a routine refuelling stop. He would not be dropping or picking up any passengers and so needed no operating permit. Everything had been cleared with the airport authorities, making this touchdown as simple as a car pulling into a local garage.

And despite Sarov's fears, the British government had not invited the supposed VIP passengers for a diplomatic breakfast in Edinburgh!

The plane broke through the cloud and, with his face pressed against the window, Alex suddenly saw countryside with miniature houses and cars dotted around it. The brilliant sunshine of the Caribbean had been replaced by the grey light and uncertain weather of a British summer's day.

He felt a sense of relief. He was back! But at the same time, he knew Sarov would never allow him off the plane. In a way, it would have been less cruel if they had refuelled in Greenland or Norway. He was being given one last look at his own country. The next time he saw it, it would have been poisoned for generations to come. Alex reached into his pocket. His hand closed around the figurine of Michael Owen. The time was getting close...

The seat-belt signs came on. A moment later, Alex felt the pressure in his ears as they dropped out of the sky. He saw a bridge, somehow delicate from this height, spanning a great stretch of water. The Forth Road Bridge ... it had to be. And there was Edinburgh, over in the west, its castle dominating the skyline. The airport came rushing up. He caught a glimpse of a bright, modern terminal, of waiting planes sitting on the apron surrounded by vans and trolleys. There was a bump as the wheels made contact with the runway and then the roar of the engines in reverse thrust. The plane slowed. They had landed.

Guided by the control tower, the Lear jet made its way to the end of the runway and into an area known as the fuel farm, far away from the main terminal. Alex gazed out of the window with a sinking feeling as the public buildings slid away behind him. For every second that they travelled, he would have further to run to raise the alarm—always assuming that he did even manage to get off the plane. The Michael Owen figure was in his hand now. What had Smithers told him? Twist the head twice one way and once the other to arm it. Wait ten seconds, then drop it and run. The confined space of an aircraft cabin seemed the perfect place to try it out. The only question was, how was Alex going to stop it knocking himself out too?

They came to a halt. Almost at once, a fuel truck began to drive towards them. Sarov had obviously prepared everything well in advance. There was a car following the truck and, looking out of the window, Alex saw that steps were being led up to the Lear jet's door. That was interesting. It seemed that somebody wanted to come onboard.

Sarov was watching him. "You will not speak, Alex," he said. "Not one single word. Before you even think of opening your mouth, I suggest you look behind you."

Conrad had moved into the seat directly behind Alex. He had a newspaper balanced on his lap.

As Alex turned, he lifted it to reveal a large black pistol with a silencer, pointing directly at him.

"Nobody will hear anything," Sarov said. "If Conrad even thinks you are about to try something, he will fire. The bullet will pass through the seat and into your spine. Death will be instant but it will appear that you have simply fallen asleep."

Alex knew that it wouldn't be as easy as that. A person being shot in the back did not look like a person falling asleep. Sarov was taking huge risks. But this whole business was a huge risk. The stakes couldn't be higher. Alex had no doubt that if he tried to tell anyone what was happening he would be killed immediately.

The door of the plane opened and a ginger-haired man in blue overalls entered, carrying a sheaf of papers. Sarov rose to greet him. "Do you speak English?" the man asked in a Scottish accent.

"Yes."

"I have some papers here for you to sign."

Alex turned his head slightly. The man saw him and nodded. Alex nodded back. He could almost feel Conrad pressing the back of his seat with the gun. He said nothing. And then it was over.

Sarov had signed the papers and returned the man's pen.

"Here's a receipt for you," the man said, handing Sarov a sheet. "And we'll have you back in the air in no time at all."

"Thank you." Sarov nodded.

"Are you going to come out and stretch your legs? It's a pleasant day here in Edinburgh. We can offer you some tea and shortbread if you want to come to the office."

"No, thank you. We're all a little tired. We'll stay where we are."

"OK. If you're absolutely sure, I'll get rid of the steps..."

They were going to take away the steps—and as soon as they were gone, Sarov would seal the door! Alex had only seconds in which to act. He waited until the man had left the cabin, then stood up. His hands were in front of him, the Michael Owen figure lying concealed in his palm.

"Sit down!" Conrad hissed.

"It's all right, Conrad," Alex said. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm just stretching my legs."

Sarov had sat down again. He was examining the paperwork the man had given him. Alex strolled past him. His mouth was dry and he was glad that the sensor that had been used at the gate of the Casa de Oro wasn't on the plane. If it had been turned on him now, his heartbeat would have been deafening. This was his last chance. Alex carefully measured out each step. If he had been walking towards his own scaffold, he couldn't have been more tense.

"Where are you going, Alex?" Sarov asked.

Alex turned Michael Owen's head twice.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"What's that you've got in your hands?"

Alex hesitated. But if he tried to pretend he had nothing, Sarov would become even more suspicious than he already was. He held up the figurine. "It's my lucky mascot," he said.

"Michael Owen."

He took another step forward. He gave the player's head another turn back.

Ten ... nine ... eight... seven...

"Sit down, Alex," Sarov said.

"I've got a headache," Alex said. "I just want some fresh air."

"You are not to leave the plane."

"I'm not going anywhere, General."

But Alex had already reached the door and felt the fresh Scottish breeze on his face. A tow-truck was pulling the steps away. He watched as a gap opened up between them and the door.

Four... three ... two...

"Alex! Return to your seat!"

Alex dropped the figurine and threw himself forward.

Conrad Leapt up like an angry snake, the gun in his hand.

The figurine exploded.

Alex felt the blast behind him. There was a flash of light and a bang that sounded massively loud, although no windows broke and there was no fire or smoke. His ears rang and for a moment he couldn't see. But he was outside the plane. He had been outside the plane when the stun grenade

went off. The steps were still moving away, disappearing in front of him. He was going to miss them! The asphalt surface of the fuel farm apron was five metres below. If he fell that distance, he would break a leg. He might even be killed. But he had made his move just in time. He landed flat on his stomach on the top of the staircase with his legs dangling in the air.

Quickly he pulled himself to his feet. The man with the ginger hair was staring at him, astonished. Alex ran down the still-moving steps. As his feet came into contact with the ground, he felt a thrill of triumph. He was home. And it seemed that the stun grenade had done its job.

There was no movement on the plane. Nobody was firing at him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” the man demanded.

Alex ignored him. This wasn’t the right person to be talking to—and he needed to put as much distance as he could between himself and the plane. Smithers had said that the grenade would only incapacitate the enemy for a few minutes. Sarov and Conrad would wake up soon. And they would waste no time in coming after him.

He ran. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man snatch a radio out of his pocket and talk into it—but that didn’t matter. There were other men around the plane, about to start refuelling. They must surely have heard the explosion. Even if Alex was recaptured, the plane wouldn’t be allowed to leave.

But he had no intention of being recaptured. He had already noticed a row of administrative buildings on the perimeter of the airfield and he made for them, the breath rasping in his throat.

He reached a door and pulled at it. It was locked! He looked through the window. There was a hallway on the other side and a public telephone, but for some reason the building was closed.

For a moment he was tempted to smash the glass—but that would take too long. Cursing quietly, he left the door and ran the twenty metres to the next building.

This one was open. He found himself in a corridor with storerooms and offices on either side.

There didn’t seem to be anyone about. Now all he needed was a phone. He tried a door. It led into a room full of shelves with a photocopier and stationery supplies. The next door was locked.

Alex was getting increasingly desperate. He tried another door and this time he was lucky. It was an office with a desk and, on the desk, a telephone. There was nobody inside. He ran in and snatched it up.

But it was only now he realized that he had no idea what number to ring. The mobile that Smithers had given him had been equipped with a hot key—a direct link to MI6. But nobody had ever given him a direct number. What was he to do? Dial the operator and ask for military intelligence? They would think he was mad.

He didn’t have any time to waste. Sarov might already have recovered. Even now he might be on his way. The office had a window but it looked out the back, so there was no sign of the plane or the runway. Alex made a decision and dialled 999.

The line rang twice before it was answered.

It was a woman’s voice. “You have rung the emergency services. Which service do you require?”

“Police,” Alex said.

“Connecting you now...”

He heard the ring tone.

And then a hand came down onto the telephone, cutting him off. Alex swung round, breathless, expecting to see Sarov in front of him—or worse still, Conrad with the gun.

But it wasn’t either of them. It was an airport security guard who had walked into the office while Alex was making his call. He was about fifty years old with greying hair and a chin that had sunk into his neck. His stomach bulged over his belt and his trousers stopped about two centimetres short of his ankles. The man had a radio attached to his jacket. His name—George Prescott—was written on a badge on his top pocket. He was looming over Alex with a stern look on his face and, with a sinking heart, Alex recognized a real security nightmare: a man with the self-important smugness of the traffic warden, the car park attendant, any petty official.

“What are you doing here, laddie?” Prescott demanded.

“I need to make a telephone call,” Alex said.

“I can see that. But this isn’t a public telephone. This isn’t even a public office. This is a secure complex. You shouldn’t be in here.”

“No, you don’t understand. This is an emergency!”

“Oh yes? And what sort of emergency do you mean?” Prescott obviously didn’t believe him.

“I can’t explain. Just let me make the call.”

The security guard smiled. He was enjoying himself. He spent five days a week plodding from one office to another, checking doors and turning off Lights. It was good to have someone he could boss about. “You’re not making any calls until you tell me what you’re doing here!” he said. “This is a private office.” His eyes narrowed.

“Have you opened any drawers? Have you taken anything?”

Alex’s nerves were screaming but he forced himself to remain calm. “I haven’t taken anything, Mr Prescott,” he said. “I just got off a plane that landed a few minutes ago—”

"What plane?"

"A private plane."

"Have you got a passport?"

"No."

"That's a very serious matter. You can't enter the country without a passport."

"My passport is on the plane!"

"Then I'll escort you back and we'll get it."

"No!" Alex could feel the seconds racing by. What could he say to this man that would persuade him to let him make the phone call? His mind was in a whirl and suddenly, for the first time in his life, he found himself blurting out the truth. "Listen," he said. "I know this is hard to believe, but I work for the government. The British government. If you let me call them, they'll prove it to you. I'm a spy—"

"A spy?" Prescott's face broke into a smile. But there was no humour in it at all. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"A fourteen-year-old spy? I think you've been watching too much television, laddie."

"It's true!"

"I don't think so."

"Listen to me, please. A man has just tried to kill me. He's on a plane on the runway and unless you let me make this call, a lot of people are going to die."

"What?"

"He's got a nuclear bomb, for God's sake!"

That was a mistake. Prescott bristled. "I'll ask you not to take the name of the Lord in vain, if you don't mind." He came to a decision. "I don't know how you got here or what you're playing at, but you're coming with me to security and passport control in the main terminal." He reached out for Alex. "Come along now! I've had enough of your nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense. There's a man called Sarov. He's carrying a nuclear bomb. He's planning to detonate it in Murmansk. I'm the only one who can stop him. Please, Mr Prescott. Just let me phone the police. It'll only take me twenty seconds and you can stand here and watch me. Let me talk to them and afterwards you can take me wherever you like."

But the security guard wouldn't budge. "You're not making any calls and you're coming with me now," he said.

Alex made up his mind. He had tried pleading and he had tried telling the truth. Neither had succeeded, so he would just have to take the security guard out. Prescott moved round the desk, getting closer to him. Alex tensed himself, balancing on the balls of his feet, his fists ready. He knew that the man was only doing his job and he didn't want to hurt him but there was no other way. And then the door opened. "There you are, Alex! I was worried about you..." It was Sarov.

Conrad was with him. Both of them looked ill—their skin white and eyes not quite focused.

There was no expression on either man's face. "Who are you?" Prescott demanded. "I'm Alex's father," Sarov replied. "Isn't that right, Alex?"

Alex hesitated. He realized he was still in combat position, about to strike out. Slowly, he lowered his arms. He knew it was over and tasted the bitterness of defeat. There was nothing he could do. If he argued in front of Prescott, Sarov would simply kill both of them. If he tried to fight, the result would be just the same. Alex had just one hope left. If he walked out of here with Sarov and Conrad and the security guard was still alive, there was just a chance that he might tell his story to someone who would report it to MI6. It would certainly be too late for Alex. But the world might still be saved.

"Isn't that right, Alex?" Sarov was waiting for an answer.

"Yes," Alex said. "Hello, Dad."

"So what's all this business about bombs and spies?" Prescott asked.

Alex inwardly groaned. Why couldn't the man keep his mouth shut?

"Is that what Alex has been telling you?" Sarov asked.

"Aye. That and a whole lot more besides."

"Has he made a telephone call?"

"No." Prescott puffed himself up. "The wee rascal was helping himself to the phone when I came in. But I soon put a stop to that."

Sarov nodded slowly. He was pleased. "Well... he does have a vivid imagination," he explained.

"Alex has not been well lately. He has mental problems. Sometimes he finds it hard to distinguish between fantasy and reality."

"How did he get in here?" Prescott demanded.

"He must have slipped out of the plane when nobody was watching. He has, of course, no permission to be on British soil."

"Is he British?"

No.” Sarov took hold of Alex’s arm. “And now we must return to the plane. We still have a long journey ahead of us.”

“Wait a minute!” The guard wasn’t going to let them off that easily. “I’m sorry, sir, but your son was strictly off-limits. And for that matter, so are you. You can’t just go wandering around Edinburgh airport like this! I’m going to have to report this.”

“I quite understand.” Sarov didn’t seem at all perturbed. “I must get the boy back on the plane.

But I will leave you with my assistant, who will give you all the details you require. If necessary, he will accompany you to your superior’s office. And I have to thank you for preventing my son from making a telephone call, Mr Prescott. That would have been most embarrassing for us all.”

Without waiting for a reply, Sarov turned and, still holding Alex’s arm, led him out of the room.

An hour later, the Lear jet took off on the last leg of its journey. Alex was sitting in the same seat as before but now he was handcuffed to it. Sarov hadn’t hurt him and no longer seemed even aware that he was on the plane. In a way, that was the most frightening thing about him. Alex had expected anger, violence, perhaps even a sudden death at the hands of Conrad. But Sarov had done nothing. From the moment that Alex had been escorted back onto the plane, the Russian hadn’t so much as looked at him. There had, of course, been problems. The explosion on the plane and Alex’s leap out of it had raised all sorts of questions. The pilot had been in constant communication with the control tower. The sound of the explosion had been a faulty microwave oven, he’d explained. As for the boy? General Alexei Sarov, on the staff of the Russian president, was travelling with a nephew. The boy had high spirits. Very stupid, but everything was under control...

If this had been an ordinary private jet, the police would have been called. But it was registered to Boris Kiriyyenko. It had diplomatic immunity. All in all, the authorities agreed, it would be easier to turn a blind eye and let it go.

George Prescott’s body was discovered four hours later. He was sitting, slumped, in a stationery cupboard. There was a look of surprise on his face and a single, round bullet wound between his eyes.

By then, the Lear was in Russian airspace. Even as the alarm was raised and the police were finally called, the cabin lights were dimmed as the jet curved over the Kola Peninsula preparing for its final descent.

THE END OF THE WORLD

Airports are the same all over the world, but the one at Murmansk had managed to achieve a new level of ugliness. It had been built in the middle of nowhere so that, from the air, it looked like a mistake. At ground level, it offered just one low-rise terminal built out of glass and tired, grey cement, with eight white letters mounted on the roof.

Мурманск

Alex recognized the Russian spelling. Murmansk. A city with thousands of people. He wondered how many of them would be alive in twelve hours' time. Now handcuffed to one of the two guards who had flown with them all the way from Skeleton Key, he was led across an empty runway. It had rained recently. The asphalt was wet and greasy, with pools of dirty water all around. There were no other planes in sight. In fact, the airport didn't seem to be in use at all. A few lights burned, dull yellow, behind the glass. But there were no people. The single arrivals door was locked and chained as if the airport had given up all hope of anyone ever actually coming there.

They were expected. Three army trucks and a mud-streaked saloon car were waiting. A row of men stood to attention, dressed in khaki uniforms with black belts and boots almost like Wellingtons rising to their calves. Each one of them carried a machine-gun on a strap across his chest. Their commander, wearing the same uniform as Sarov, stepped forward and saluted. He and Sarov shook hands, then embraced. They spoke for a few minutes. Then the commander snapped an order. Two of his men ran to the plane and began to unload the silver chest that was Sarov's nuclear bomb. Alex watched as it was taken out of the back and loaded into one of the trucks. The soldiers were well disciplined. Here was enough power to destroy a continent, but not one head turned as it was carried past.

With the bomb in place, the soldiers swivelled round and, marching in time, approached the two remaining trucks and climbed in. His hands cuffed together now, Alex was bundled into the front seat of one, next to the driver. Nobody looked at him. Nobody seemed too curious about who he was. Sarov must have radioed ahead and warned them that he would be there. He examined the man driving the truck. He was tough and clean-shaven with clear blue eyes. There was no expression on his face. A professional soldier. Alex turned and looked out of the window in time to see Sarov and Conrad getting into the car.

They set off. There really was nothing outside the airport, just a flat, empty landscape where even the trees managed to be stunted and dull. Alex shivered and tried to cross his hands to rub warmth into his shoulders. There was a clink from the handcuffs and the driver glanced at him angrily.

They drove for about forty minutes down a road pitted with holes. A few buildings, modern and characterless, crept up on them and suddenly they were in Murmansk itself. Was it night or day?

The sky was still light but the streetlamps were on. There were people on the pavements but they didn't seem to be going anywhere, just drifting along like sleepwalkers. Nobody looked at them as they followed a single road, four lanes wide. This was a boulevard in the centre of the city.

It was absolutely straight and seemed to go nowhere, with blank, uninteresting buildings on either side. Murmansk was made up of row after row of almost identical apartment blocks like so many match boxes. There didn't seem to be any cinemas, restaurants, shops—anything that would make life worth living.

There were no suburbs. The city just stopped and suddenly they were driving through empty tundra, heading for a horizon that had nothing at all to offer. They were fourteen hundred kilometres from the North Pole and there was nothing here. People with no life and a sun without a shred of warmth. Alex thought of the journey he had made. From Wimbledon to Cornwall.

Then London, Miami and Skeleton Key. And finally here. Was it to be finally? What a horrible place to finish his life. He really had come to the end of the world.

There were no other cars on the road and no street signs. Alex stopped even trying to see where they were going. After another thirty minutes they began to slow down, then turned off. There was a crunching sound under the wheels as they left the asphalt surface and continued along gravel. Was this where the Russians kept their submarines? He could only see a chicken wire fence and a dilapidated wooden kiosk trying to pass as a sentry box.

They stopped in front of a red and white barrier. A man appeared, dressed in dark blue with a loose, flapping overcoat and, showing underneath it, a tunic and a striped T-shirt. He was a Russian sailor. He couldn't have been more than twenty years old and he looked confused. He ran over to the car and said something in Russian.

Conrad shot him. Alex saw the hand come out of the window and the flash of the gun, but it all happened so quickly that he could hardly believe it had happened at all. The young Russian was thrown backwards. Conrad fired a second time. There was another sailor in the sentry box—Alex hadn't even noticed him—and he shouted out, crumpling backwards. Nobody had spoken a word. Two soldiers climbed out of the front truck and went over to the barrier blocking the entrance. Was this really the entrance to a submarine base? Alex had seen more sophisticated security in a supermarket carpark. The soldiers simply lifted the barrier. The convoy moved on.

They followed a twisting, bumpy track down a hill and there, at last, was the sea. The first thing Alex saw was a fleet of ice-breakers, moored about eight hundred metres away, huge iron blocks sitting silently, impossibly on the sea. It seemed against the laws of nature that such monstrous things could float. There were no lights onboard, no movement at all. On the other side of the water, another grim stretch of coastline rose up, streaked with white; though whether this was salt or some sort of permanent snow, Alex couldn't say.

The trucks bounced down and suddenly they were in a harbour, surrounded by cranes, gantries, warehouses and sheds. It was a devil's playground of twisted steel and cement, of hooks and chains, pulleys and cables, drums, wooden pallets and huge steel containers. Rusting ships sat in the water or stood on dry land, suspended on a network of stilts. Cars, lorries and tractors, some obviously derelict, stood idle at the water's edge. There was a row of long wooden cabins to one side, each one numbered in yellow and grey paint. They reminded Alex of buildings he'd seen in old World War Two movies, in prisoner of war camps. Could this be where the other sailors slept? If so, they must all be in bed. The harbour was deserted. Nothing moved.

They stopped and Alex felt the truck rock as the soldiers poured out behind him. A moment later he saw them, their machine-guns raised, and

wondered if he was meant to follow the men. But the driver shook his head, gesturing at him to stay where he was. Alex watched the men fan out across the compound, moving quickly as they made for the cabins. There was no sign of Sarov.

He must still be in the car, which was parked round the other side.

A long pause. Then someone gave a signal. There was the smash of wood, a door being forced open, then the concentrated chatter of machine-gun fire. Somebody shouted. An electric bell began to ring, the sound all too small and ineffective. Three half-dressed men appeared round the side of the cabins and sprinted forward, trying to find shelter among the containers. More gunfire. Alex saw two of them go down, followed by the third, his hands scrabbling at the air as he was hit in the back. There was a single shot from a window. One man was trying to fight back. A grenade curved through the air and onto the roof of the building. There was an explosion and half the wall blew out, turned into matchsticks. The next time Alex looked, the window and presumably the man behind it had been destroyed.

The attack had come without any warning at all. Sarov's men had been well armed and prepared.

There had only been a handful of sailors at the yard and they had all been asleep. It was over very quickly. The ringing stopped. Smoke curled out of the damaged building. A figure floated past, face down in the water. The harbour had been taken. Sarov was in total command.

The driver got out of the truck, went quickly round the front and opened the door for Alex. He climbed down awkwardly, his hands still chained together. Sarov's men had moved into the second phase of the operation. Alex saw bodies being carried out of sight. One of the other trucks reversed, moving closer to the water's edge. The commander from the airport called out an order and the soldiers scattered, taking up positions that they must have worked out months before. It seemed unlikely that anybody would have had time to raise the alarm, but if anyone approached the yard from Murmansk, they would find it defended. Sarov was standing to one side with Conrad beside him. He was looking at something. Alex followed his eyes.

And there were the submarines!

Alex gasped. Here was what this whole thing had been about! There were just four of them, bloated metal beasts that lay half-submerged in the sea, secured by ropes as thick as a man's arm.

Each one was the size of an office building turned on its side. The submarines had no markings whatsoever and no flags. They seemed to be coated in black oil or tar. Their conning towers, set well back, were closed and solid. Alex shivered.

He'd never thought that a machine could actually emanate evil, but these did. They were as dark and as cold as the water that lapped about them. They looked just like the bombs that they had become. Three of the submarines were in a line, moored against the side of the harbour. The fourth was in a bay of its own, a little way out. Alex noticed a crane at the end of a quay, right next to the water. Years ago it might have been painted yellow but most of the colour had flaked off. The control cabin was only about ten metres above the ground with a ladder reaching up to it. The arm of the crane slanted up, then bent down, mimicking the neck and head of a bird. This was a crane with no hook. Instead there was a metal disc like an oversized bath plug dangling underneath the arm, connected to it by a chain and a series of electric cables.

Conrad shouted something and the driver led Alex over to a solid handrail on the edge of the quay. It had obviously been placed there to stop anyone falling in and it was securely bolted to the ground. The driver unlocked one of Alex's hands then pulled with the chain, leading him like a dog. He walked him over to the handrail and cuffed him to it. Alex was left standing on his own in the middle of everything. He jerked at the chain but it was useless. He wasn't going anywhere.

Alex could only stand and watch as two of the soldiers lifted the bomb out of the truck as carefully as they could. He saw the strain in their faces as they set it on the ground right next to the edge of the quay and only a few metres from the crane. Sarov walked over, Conrad limping along next to him. Conrad looked at Alex and one corner of his mouth twitched into a smile.

Sarov reached into his jacket pocket and took out the plastic card he had shown Alex on the plane. He held it for a moment, then fed it into the slot on the side of the nuclear bomb. At once, the silver chest came to life. A series of red lights began to blink on a panel. Alex saw a line of digits on a liquid crystal display. Hours, minutes and seconds. They were already counting down.

The magnetic stripe on the card had activated the bomb. Somewhere inside the chest, electronic wheels were turning. The detonation sequence had begun.

Then Sarov came over to Alex.

He stood there, examining him as if for the first and last time. As ever, his face gave nothing away, but Alex detected something in the man's eyes. Sarov would have denied it. He would have been angered if anyone had suggested it. But the sadness was there. It was plain to see.

"And so we come to the end," he said. "You are standing in the Nuclear Submarine Repair Shipyard of Murmansk. You may be interested to know that the soldiers we met at the airport have all served with me in the past and are loyal to me still. The entire compound is now under my control and as you have seen, the nuclear bomb is primed. I'm afraid I cannot stay with you any longer. I have to return to the airport to ensure that everything is ready for our flight to Moscow. I will leave Conrad to place the bomb in position on the submarine, directly over the nuclear reactor that is still there inside. It is possible that the detonator in the bomb will also trigger the reactor, doubling or trebling the force of the explosion. This will mean very little to you, as you will be vaporized instantly—before your brain has time even to work out what has happened. Conrad is very disappointed. He had hoped I would allow him to kill you himself."

Alex said nothing.

"I am so sorry, Alex, that in the end you were so much more stupid than I had thought, although perhaps I should have expected it. A Western child, brought up and educated in Britain ... a country that is itself only a shadow of what it once was. Why couldn't you see what I was offering you? Why couldn't you accept your place in the new world? You could have been my son. You chose to be my enemy. And this is where it has brought you."

There was another, long silence. Sarov reached out and gently stroked Alex's cheek. He looked into the boy's eyes one last time. Then he turned on his heel and walked away. Alex watched him get into his car and drive off.

The other soldiers were a distance away, still in their places around the site. But here at the centre, with the crane, the submarines and the nuclear

bomb, Alex and Conrad were on their own. It was as if they had the whole harbour to themselves.

Conrad stepped forward and stopped very close to Alex. "I have a job to do," he rasped. "But then we will have a little time together. Strange though it is, Sarov still cares about you. He told me to leave you alone. But I think, this time, I must disobey the general. You are mine! And I intend to make you suffer..."

"Just talking to you makes me suffer," Alex said.

Conrad ignored him. He went over to the crane and climbed the short ladder into the cabin. Alex saw him start up the controls and a moment later the metal disc swung round so that it was over the bomb, then began to descend. Conrad handled the crane expertly. The disc fell quickly, stopped, then gently came into contact with the surface of the chest. Alex heard a loud click and a moment later the chest suddenly swayed and left the ground. Now he understood. The metal disc was a powerful electromagnet. Conrad was operating a magnetic hoist, using it to carry the bomb across the water and deposit it on the submarine. The whole operation would take him about three minutes. Then he would come for Alex.

Alex had run out of time. He had to act now.

The stick of bubblegum that Smithers had given him was in his right pocket. Only his left hand was free and it took him a few precious seconds to get it out, unwrap it and shove it into his mouth. He wondered what Conrad would think if he had seen him. Certainly Sarov wouldn't have been amused. A Western boy about to face death and all he could think about was gum!

Alex chewed. Smithers had managed to get one part of the formula right. The gum did indeed taste of strawberries. He wondered how long he should leave it in his mouth. His saliva was meant to activate it, but how much saliva did it need? He chewed until the gum felt soft and manageable and the strawberry taste had faded away. Then he spat it into his hand and quickly pressed it into the handcuff, forcing it into the lock.

The silver chest had travelled all the way across the water. Alex saw it swinging gently over the submarine. Inside the control cabin, Conrad leaned forward. Slowly he lowered the chest until it landed on the metal surface. The wires and chains attached to the hoist sagged, then straightened again. The hoist began to move back towards the quay. But it had left the bomb behind.

Something was definitely happening inside the handcuffs. Alex heard a very faint hissing. The pink gum was expanding. It was oozing back out of the lock and there was much more gum coming out than he had put in. There was a sudden crack. The metal had shattered. Alex felt a painful sting as a piece of broken metal cut into his wrist. But then the handcuffs fell open. He was free!

Conrad had seen what had happened. He was already climbing out of the crane. He hadn't turned off the controls and the magnet was still coming back on its own, just a few metres above the water. The bomb was out of reach on the other side. Even as Alex looked around for a weapon, Conrad reached the bottom of the ladder and rushed towards him. Suddenly they were face to face.

Conrad smiled. The smile tugged at the one side of his face that could move. The other side, with the bald scalp above it, remained still. Alex could see at once that, despite all his terrible injuries, Conrad was utterly confident. A moment later, he knew why. Fired by hatred, Conrad moved with surprising speed. He was standing in combat stance one moment, a blur the next. Alex felt a foot kick him in the chest. The world spun and he was thrown to the ground, winded and bruised.

Meanwhile, Conrad had landed lightly on his feet. He wasn't even out of breath.

Painfully, Alex picked himself up. Conrad walked towards him and lashed out a second time. His foot missed by a centimetre as Alex dived back to the ground, rolling over and over to the water's edge. A hand reached out and grabbed hold of his shirt. Alex saw the dreadful stitch-marks where the hand had been sewn back onto the wrist. He was dragged to his feet. Conrad slapped him with tremendous force. Alex tasted blood. The hand released him. He stood, swaying, trying to find some sort of defence.

But he had none. For all his strength and skill, Conrad had beaten him. And now he was coming in for the kill. Alex saw it in his face...

And then, out of nowhere, came a sudden clanging. The alarm bell had started up again. There was a burst of gunfire and, seconds later, an explosion. Someone had thrown another grenade.

Conrad stopped dead in his tracks, his head twisting round. There was more gunfire. Impossible though it was, it seemed that the harbour was under attack.

With new strength, Alex ran forward. He had seen a metal rod lying on the ground amongst all the other debris. His hands closed around it and he swept it up, grateful to have something that felt like a weapon in his hands. Conrad turned to face him. The shooting had intensified. Now it seemed to be coming from two directions as Sarov's men defended themselves against an enemy that had come from nowhere. There was a screech of tyres, and in the far distance Alex saw a jeep come smashing through one of the chicken wire fences. It skidded to a halt and three men jumped out and took cover. They were all dressed in blue. What was going on here? The Russian navy against the Russian army? And who, exactly, had raised the alarm?

But even if Sarov's plans had been revealed, even if a rescue operation had somehow been put in place, Alex was still in grave danger. Conrad was on the balls of his feet, looking to find a way past the metal rod. And what about the nuclear bomb? Alex didn't know if Sarov had primed it to go off in five hours or five minutes. Knowing how mad he was, it could have been either.

Conrad leapt forward. Alex lunged with the metal pole and felt it ram into the man's shoulder.

But his smile of satisfaction vanished as Conrad grabbed hold of the rod with both hands. He had allowed Alex to hit him simply because that would bring the rod within his reach. Alex pulled back, but Conrad was much too strong for him. He felt the metal being torn out of his hands, cutting into his palms. Alex let go of the rod, then cried out as Conrad swung it viciously like a scythe. The metal slammed into the side of Alex's leg and he was down again, on his back, unable to move.

More gunfire. Although his vision was dimmed, Alex saw two more grenades arc through the air.

They landed next to one of the ships and exploded, a huge fireball of flame. Two of Sarov's men were lifted into the air. Two or even three machine-guns began to chatter simultaneously. There were screams. More flames.

Conrad stood over him.

He seemed to have forgotten what was happening in the shipyard. Or perhaps he didn't care. He pulled up one sleeve, then the other. Finally he dropped down so that he was sitting on Alex's chest, one knee on either side. His hands closed around Alex's throat.

Gently, enjoying what he was doing, he began to squeeze.

Alex felt himself being slowly strangled. He couldn't breathe. There were already black spots in front of his eyes. But he had seen something that Conrad hadn't. It was slowly making its way back towards them, crossing the water. The magnetic disc.

Conrad had left the controls on in the cabin in his haste to get over to Alex. Was it possible...?

Alex remembered what Sarov had told him about his assistant. He had metal pins all over his body. There were metal wires in his jaw and a metal plate in his head...

The magnet was almost over them, blotting out the sky. Alex couldn't breathe. Conrad's hands were tight around his throat. He had only seconds left.

With the last of his strength, he suddenly lashed out with both his fists, at the same time jerking his body up. Conrad was taken by surprise. He started back, his hands loosening. The magnet was right above him. Alex saw the shock in his face as all the metal plates, pins and wires in his body entered the magnetic field. Conrad yelled and disappeared, plucked into the air by invisible hands. His back smashed into the disc with a terrible snapping sound. At once he went still, attached to the disc by his shoulders, his arms and legs hanging down.

The crane continued moving, carrying the limp body in a gentle curve over the quay.

Alex gasped for breath. The world swam back into focus. "What an attractive man," he muttered.

Slowly, he pulled himself to his feet, then staggered over to the handrail where he had been chained. He propped himself against it, no longer able to stand without its support. There was a burst of gunfire, longer and more powerful than any that had gone before. A helicopter had appeared, flying in low over the sea. He saw an airman sitting in the open doorway, his legs dangling, a huge gun cradled in his lap. One of Sarov's trucks was blown off its wheels, twisted over twice and exploded in flames.

The bomb...

Alex could work out what was happening here later. Nobody would be safe until the bomb was defused. His throat was still burning. It took all his strength to draw breath. But now he ran forward and climbed into the crane. He had operated a crane before. He knew it couldn't be too difficult. He reached out and took the controls. At the same moment, one of Sarov's men fired at him. The bullet clanged against the metal casing of the cabin. Alex ducked instinctively and pulled a lever.

The magnetic disc stopped and swung in the air with Conrad stuck beneath it like a broken doll.

Alex pushed forward and it began to drop down into the sea. No! That wasn't what he wanted.

He pulled the lever back and it stopped abruptly. How did you turn off the magnet? Alex looked around him and saw a switch. He pressed it. A light came on over his head. Wrong switch! There was a button set in the control stick he was holding and he tried that. At once, Conrad fell free.

He plunged into the grey, freezing water and sank immediately. With all the metal inside him, Alex thought, it was hardly surprising.

He pulled the control stick towards him and the magnet rose again. A soldier ran across the quay towards him. There was a burst of fire from the helicopter and the man fell down and lay still.

Now ... concentrate! Alex tried a second lever and this time the magnet began its return journey over to the submarine. It seemed to take for ever. Alex was only partly aware of the battle still raging all around him. It seemed that the Russian authorities had arrived in force. Sarov's men were heavily out-numbered but were still fighting back. They knew they had nothing to lose.

The magnet reached the submarine. Alex dropped it towards the silver chest, remembering how delicately it had been done by Conrad. He was less skilled—and winced as the heavy disc smashed into the top. Damn! He would set the thing off himself if he wasn't careful. He pressed the button in the control stick a second time and actually felt the magnet come alive and knew that the nuclear bomb was in its grip. He pulled back, lifting the magnetic hoist. The silver chest came clear of the submarine.

Now, a centimetre at a time, he swung the arm of the crane over the water, bringing the nuclear bomb back towards the harbour. A second bullet slammed into the crane and the window shattered right next to his head. Alex cried out. Glass fragments showered over him. He thought he was going to be blinded. But when he next looked up, the nuclear bomb was over the quay and he knew that he was nearly finished.

He lowered it. At the very moment it touched the ground, there was another explosion, louder and closer than any that had gone before. But it wasn't nuclear. One of the warehouses had shattered. Another was on fire. A second helicopter had arrived and it was strafing the ground, whipping dust and debris into the air. It was hard to be sure, but Alex thought that Sarov's men were losing ground. There seemed to be less return fire. Well, in a few more seconds, it wouldn't matter.

All he had to do was retrieve the plastic card.

He pulled the magnet clear, jumped from the crane, then ran over to the chest. He could see the card, half protruding from the slot where Sarov had inserted it. The lights were still blinking, the numbers spinning. There was less gunfire around him now. Looking over his shoulder, he saw more men in blue edging slowly into the compound, coming in from all sides. He reached down and pulled out the card. The lights on the nuclear bomb went out. The numbers disappeared. He had done it!

"Put it back."

The words were softly spoken but each one dripped menace. Alex looked up and saw Sarov in front of him. Somehow he must have learned that the compound was under attack and had made his way back. How much time had passed since the two of them had last faced each other? Thirty minutes? An hour? However long it had been, Sarov had changed. He was smaller, shrunken.

The light in his eyes had gone out and what little colour there had been in his skin seemed to have become muddied. He had been wounded fighting his way back into the harbour. There was a rip in his jacket and a slowly spreading red stain. His left hand hung useless.

But his right hand was holding a gun.

"It's over, General," Alex said. "Conrad is dead. The Russian army is here. Someone must have tipped them off."

Sarov shook his head. "I can still detonate the bomb. There is an override. You and I will die.

But the end result will be the same."

"A better world?"

"That's all I ever wanted, Alex. All of this...! I was only ever doing what I believed in."

Alex felt an enormous tiredness creeping up on him. He weighed the card in his hand. It was strange really. From one Skeleton Key to another. It all came down to this.

Sarov raised the gun. The blood was spreading more rapidly now. He swayed on his feet. "Give me the card or I will shoot you," he said.

Alex lifted the card then suddenly flicked it. It spun twice in the air, then disappeared into the water. "Go ahead then, if that's what you want," he said. "Shoot me!"

Sarov's eyes flickered over to the lost card, then back to Alex. "Why...?" he whispered.

"I'd rather be dead than have a father like you," Alex said.

There were voices shouting. Footsteps coming nearer.

"Goodbye, Alex," Sarov said.

He raised the gun and fired a single shot.

AFTER ALEX

"We've lost Alex Rider," Mrs Jones said. "I'm sorry, Alan. I know it's not what you wanted to hear. But that's the end of it."

The head of MI6 Special Operations and his number two were having lunch together in a restaurant near Liverpool Street Station. They ate there frequently, although not often together.

The restaurant was in a basement with low, vaulted ceilings, soft lighting and bare brick walls.

Blunt liked the starched white tablecloths and the old-fashioned service. Also, the food was poor so few people came there. That was useful when he wanted to have a conversation such as this.

"Alex did very well," he muttered.

"Oh yes. I had an email from Joe Byrne in Virginia. Of course, he was upset about the loss of his own two agents in the underwater cave, but he was full of praise for Alex. He definitely owes us a favour... which will at least be useful in the future." She took a bread roll and broke it in half.

"It wouldn't surprise me if the CIA didn't start training their own teenage spy now. The Americans are always copying our ideas."

"When we're not copying theirs," Blunt remarked.

"That's true."

They paused as the waiter came over with the first course. Grilled sardines for Mrs Jones, soup for Blunt. Neither dish looked particularly appetizing but that didn't matter. Neither of them had much of an appetite.

"I've looked through the files and I think I have the general picture," Blunt said. "But perhaps you can fill me in on some of the details. In particular, I'd like to know how the Russian authorities found out about Sarov in time."

"That was because of what happened at Edinburgh Airport," Mrs Jones explained. She looked down at her plate. There were four sardines lying side by side, complete with heads and tails. If it was possible for a fish to look unhappy, these had managed it. She squeezed lemon over them.

The juice formed tears beneath the unblinking eyes.

"Alex ran into a security guard called George Prescott," she went on. "He'd managed to escape from Sarov's plane using a gadget Smithers had given him."

"I don't recall authorizing Smithers—" Blunt began.

"Alex wanted to use a telephone," Mrs Jones cut in. "Obviously, he was going to warn us about Murmansk, what Sarov was planning. This man, Prescott, stopped him."

"Unfortunate."

"Yes. It must have been very frustrating. Alex actually told him that he was a spy and that he was working for us, but then Sarov caught up with him. Prescott was killed—and that was the end of it. Or it would have been ... but we were extremely fortunate. Prescott had a radio transmitter clipped to his jacket. It was turned on throughout his conversation with Alex and his office heard every word that was said. Of course, they didn't believe Alex either, but when Prescott was found with a bullet in his head they put two and two together and got on to us as fast as they could. I was the one who alerted the authorities at Murmansk and I must say that the Russians acted very promptly. They pulled a naval force together, plus two helicopter gunships, and stormed the yard."

"What happened to the bomb?"

"They have it. According to their people, it would have been big enough to blow a sizeable hole in the Kola Peninsular. The fallout would have contaminated Norway, Finland and, for that matter, most of Great Britain. And I really do think the backlash would have been enough to force Kiriyyenko out of power. Nobody likes him very much anyway."

"Where is Kiriyyenko?" Blunt's soup was almost cold. He had forgotten what was meant to be in it.

"The Cuban authorities found him locked up on Skeleton Key. Shouting his head off and blaming everyone except himself." Mrs Jones shook her head. "He's back in Moscow now."

Sarov gave him a bad scare, but then he gave us all a bad scare. If it hadn't been for Alex, who knows what might have happened."

"What do the Cubans have to say about all this?"

"They've disowned Sarov. Nothing to do with them. They had no idea what he was planning."

"What's so terrifying is that he nearly got away with it!"

"If it hadn't been for Alex Rider..."

The two of them finished their first course in silence.

"Where is Alex now?" Blunt asked eventually.

"He's home."

"How is he?"

Mrs Jones sighed. "It would seem that Sarov shot himself," she said. "Alex was standing right in front of him. The trouble with you, Alan, is that you've never had children and you refuse to accept the fact that, at the end of the day, Alex is only a child. He's already been through far more than

any fourteen year old possibly to be expected to ... and this last mission! I would say it was his toughest yet. And at the very end he actually saw what Sarov did!"

"I suppose Sarov didn't want to be taken alive," Blunt muttered.

"I wish it was as simple as that. It seems that Sarov had some sort of... attachment to Alex. He saw him as the son he had lost. Alex rejected him and it pushed him over the edge. That's why he did it. He couldn't live with himself any more."

Blunt signalled and a waiter came over and poured the wine. It was unusual for the two spy-masters to drink at lunchtime but Blunt had selected a half bottle of Chablis, which had been sitting in an ice bucket beside their table. Another waiter served the main courses. The food sat on the table untouched.

"What happened with that business with the triads?" Blunt asked.

"Oh—I've sorted all that out. We had a couple of their people in jail and I arranged for them to be released. Flown back to Hong Kong. It was enough. They'll leave Alex alone."

"So why do you say we've lost him?"

"The truth is, we shouldn't have used him in the first place."

"We didn't use him. It was the CIA."

"You know that doesn't make any difference." Mrs Jones tasted the wine. "The point is, I was the one who debriefed him and all I can say is ... he's not the same. I know, I've said this all before. But I was seriously worried about him, Alan. He was so silent and withdrawn. He'd been badly hurt."

"Any broken bones?"

"For heaven's sake! Children can be hurt in other ways! I'm sorry, but I do feel very strongly about this. We can't use him again. It isn't fair."

"Life isn't fair." Blunt picked up his own glass. "I think you're forgetting that Alex has just saved the world. That boy is fast becoming one of our most effective operatives. He's the best secret weapon we have. We can't afford to be sentimental about him. We'll let him rest. I dare say he needs to catch up at school, and then there's the summer holidays. But you know as well as I do, if the need arises, there's nothing to discuss. We'll use him again. And again..."

Mrs Jones put down her knife and fork. "I'm suddenly not very hungry," she said.

Blunt glanced at her. "I hope you're not getting a conscience," he said. "If you're really worried about Alex, bring him in and we'll have a little heart to heart."

Mrs Jones looked her boss straight in the eye. "He may have trouble finding yours," she said.

The next day was a Saturday. Alex got up late, showered, dressed and went down to a breakfast that his housekeeper, Jack Starbright, had prepared for him. She had cooked all his favourite things but he ate little of it, sitting at the table in silence. Jack was desperately worried about him. The day before she had tried to get him to see a doctor and for the first time in his life he had snapped at her. Now she wasn't sure what to do. If things didn't get better she would talk to that woman—Mrs Jones. Jack wasn't supposed to know what was going on, but she had a good idea. She would make them do something. Things couldn't go on like this.

"What you going to do today?" she asked.

Alex shrugged. There was a bandage round his hand where the metal pole had cut him and a number of grazes on his face. Worst of all though were the bruises around his neck. Conrad had certainly left his mark.

"D'you want to see a film?"

"No. I thought I'd go for a walk."

"I'll come with you, if you like."

"No. Thanks, Jack, but I'm OK on my own."

Ten minutes later, Alex left the house. The weather forecast had said it would be a bright day but in fact it was close and cloudy. He started walking towards the King's Road, wanting to lose himself in the crowds. He had no real idea where he was going. He just needed to think.

Sarov was dead. Alex had turned away as the man had raised the gun towards his own heart, not bearing to see any more. Minutes later it had all been over. The Repair Yard had been secured, the bomb removed. Alex himself had been whisked away by helicopter, first to a hospital in Moscow and then back to London. Someone had told him that Kiriyyenko wanted to see him.

There was talk of a medal. Alex had declined. He just wanted to go home.

And that's where he was. Everything had worked out all right. He was a hero!

So why did he feel like this? And how exactly was it that he felt? Depressed? Exhausted? He was both of those things—but worse still, he felt empty. It was almost as if he had died in the Submarine Repair Shipyard of Murmansk and had somehow returned to London as a ghost. Life was all around him but he wasn't a part of it. Even lying in his own bed, in his own house, he felt he no longer belonged.

So much had happened to him but he wasn't allowed to talk about it with anyone. He couldn't even tell Jack. She would be horrified and upset—and there was nothing she could do anyway.

He had missed more weeks of school and knew that it wasn't just the work he would have to catch up with. Friendships move on too. People already thought he was weird. It wouldn't be long before nobody was talking to him at all.

He would never have a father. He knew this now. He would never have an ordinary life.

Somehow, he had got himself trapped. A ghost. That was what he had become.

Alex hadn't heard the car stop behind him.

He hadn't heard the door open and close. But there were suddenly footsteps running up behind him and before he could move, a hand had been thrown around his chest.

"Alex!"

He spun round. "Sabina!"

Sabina Pleasure was standing in front of him, panting after the short run, wearing a Robbie Williams T-shirt and jeans, a brightly coloured straw bag over her shoulder. Her face was lit up with pleasure. "Thank goodness I found you. I've been after you for weeks. You never gave me your phone number but it's lucky I knew your address. Mum and Dad drove me over..." She gestured at her parents, sitting in the car. They both raised a hand, waving at Alex through the windscreen. "I was going to look in just in case you were at home. And here you are!" She looked at his neck, examining his bruises. "You look terrible! Have you been involved in a car smash?"

"Not exactly."

"Anyway, Alex," she interrupted. "I'm really pissed off with you. I saved your life in Cornwall, in case you don't remember—although I have to say that giving you the kiss of life on the beach was the high point of the holiday—and the next thing I knew, you'd simply vanished. I didn't even get so much as a thank-you card."

"Well, I was, sort of ... busy."

"Being James Bond, I suppose?"

"Well..." Alex didn't know what to say.

Sabina took his arm. "You can tell me all about it later. Mum and Dad have invited you to lunch and we want to talk about the South of France."

"What about it?"

"That's where we're going this summer. And you're coming too. We've got some friends who've lent us a house and a pool and it's going to be great." She looked closely at his face.

"Don't tell me you had other plans?"

Alex smiled. "No, Sabina, I haven't got any plans."

"That's settled then. Now, what do you want for lunch? I fancy an Italian—but he's been ignoring me so you'll have to do!" She laughed.

Alex and Sabina walked down the street together. Alex glanced up. The clouds had parted and the sun was out.

It looked as if it was going to be a bright day after all.

Saving the world one mission at a time

ALEX RIDER

EAGLE STRIKE



ANTHONY HOROWITZ

#1 New York Times bestselling author

Eagle Strike

Alex Rider [4]

Anthony Horowitz

Puffin (2011)

Amazon.com Review

Eagle Strike, Horowitz's fourth fictional foray into the world of British spy agency MI6, starts out calmly enough as Alex and his lovely companion, Miss Sabina Pleasure, vacation with her family in the south of France. But before you can say Goldfinger, Alex spots his old nemesis, renowned assassin Yassen Gregorovich, on the beach. What Alex discovers is a plan so diabolical that it makes all of his previous adventures seem like a stroll in the Queen Mum's garden. Alex must fight to keep Gregorovich from executing the plans of a mysterious and murderous madman--an operation code named "Eagle Strike." He will just have to face down a few minor complications first: a virtual reality game that inflicts real pain; a fleet of Porche 911 GT3-driving hit men; and even a near fatal brush with death aboard the most famous aircraft in the world, Air Force One. But he'll persevere, or his name isn't Rider: Alex Rider. *Eagle Strike*, like all of the ridiculously fun Alex Rider adventures, is a pure guilty pleasure from start to finish. Even the most reluctant of readers won't be able to resist Alex's Bond-like ingenuity and charisma. Anthony Horowitz is a master of pacing, and as Alex swings from one cliff-hanging chapter to the next, Horowitz proves that you don't have to be Shakespeare to pen a crackerjack plot! --*Jennifer Hubert*

From School Library Journal

Grade 5-10--Alex Rider, a 14-year-old secret agent who has worked for MI6--British military intelligence--returns for his fourth adventure. Vacationing in France with his girlfriend, Sabina Pleasure, and her parents, Alex spots Yassen Gregorovich, a known assassin, and senses something isn't quite right. Before long, Sabina's journalist father is injured in an "accidental" bombing and Alex is thrown into another mystery that involves a devious scheme to annihilate the world. In this heart-racing novel, Horowitz combines fast-paced action with ingenious gadgets that Alex either has on his side or is forced to battle against. The straightforward writing will appeal to a wide audience; the story is intricate enough to entertain older readers, but accessible to younger ones as well. For anyone who has enjoyed Alex's previous adventures, *EagleStrike* will prove just as good if not better, and for those who haven't been introduced to this young spy, this book will certainly get them addicted and anxiously awaiting the next installment. --Leigh Ann Morlock, Vernonia School District, OR
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PROLOGUE

The Amazon jungle. Fifteen years ago.

It had taken them five days to make the journey, cutting their way through the dense, suffocating undergrowth, fighting through the very air, which hung heavy, moist and stilt. Trees as tall as cathedrals surrounded them, and a strange, green light—almost holy—shimmered through the vast canopy of leaves. The rainforest seemed to have an intelligence of its own. Its voice was the sudden screech of a parrot, the flicker of a monkey swinging through the branches overhead. It knew they were there.

But so far they had been lucky. They had been attacked, of course, by leeches and mosquitoes and stinging ants. But the snakes and scorpions had left them alone. The rivers they had crossed had been free of piranhas. They had been allowed to go on.

They were travelling light. They earned with them only their basic rations: map, compass, water bottles, iodine tablets, mosquito nets and machetes. Their single heaviest item was the 88

Winchester rifle with Sniperscope that they were going to use to kill the man who lived here in this impenetrable place, one hundred miles south of Iquitos in Peru. The two men knew each other's names but never used them. It was part of their training. The older of the two called himself Hunter. He was English, although he spoke seven languages so fluently that he could pass himself off as a native of many of the countries he found himself in. He was about thirty, handsome, with the close-cut hair and watchful eyes of a trained soldier. The other man was slim, fair-haired and twitching with nervous energy. He had chosen the name of Cossack. He was just nineteen years old. This was his first kill. Both men were dressed in khaki—standard jungle camouflage. Their faces were also painted green, with dark brown stripes across their cheeks.

They had reached their destination just as the sun had begun to rise, and were standing there now, utterly still, ignoring the insects that buzzed around their faces, tasting their sweat.

In front of them was a clearing, man-made, separated from the jungle by a ten metre high fence.

An elegant colonial house with wooden verandas and shutters, white curtains and slowly rotating fans stood at the heart of it, with two more low brick buildings about twenty metres behind.

Accommodation for the guards. There must have been about a dozen of them patrolling the perimeter and watching from rusting metal towers. Perhaps there were more inside. But they were lazy. They were shuffling around, not concentrating on what they were supposed to be doing. They were in the middle of the jungle. They thought they were safe.

A four-seater helicopter stood waiting on a square of asphalt. It would take the owner of the house just twenty steps to walk from the front door to the helicopter. That was the only time he would be visible. That was when he would have to die.

The two men knew the name of the man they had come to kill, but they didn't use that either.

Cossack had spoken it once but Hunter had corrected him.

“Never call a target by his real name. It personalizes him. It opens a door into his life and, when the time comes, it may remind you what you are doing and make you hesitate.”

Just one of the many lessons Cossack had learnt from Hunter. They referred to the target only as the Commander. He was a military man—or he had been. He still liked to wear military-style clothes. With so many bodyguards he was in command of a small army. The name suited him.

The Commander was not a good man. He was a drug dealer, exporting cocaine on a massive scale. He also controlled one of the most vicious gangs in Peru, torturing and killing anyone who got in his way. But all this meant nothing to Hunter and Cossack. They were here because they had been paid twenty thousand pounds to take him out—and if the Commander had been a doctor or a priest it would have made no difference to them.

Hunter glanced at his watch. It was two minutes to eight in the morning and he had been told the Commander would be leaving for Lima on the hour. He also knew that the Commander was a punctual man. He loaded a single .308 cartridge into the Winchester and adjusted the Sniperscope. One shot was all he would need.

Meanwhile Cossack had taken out his field glasses and was scanning the compound for any sign of movement. The younger man was not afraid, but he was tense and excited. A trickle of perspiration curved behind his ear and ran down his neck. His mouth was dry. Something tapped gently against his back and he wondered if Hunter had touched him, warning him to stay calm.

But Hunter was some distance away, concentrating on the gun.

Something moved.

Cossack only knew for certain it was there when it climbed over his shoulder and onto his neck—and by then it was too late. Very slowly, he turned his head. And there it was, at the very edge of his field of vision. A spider, clinging to the side of his neck, just underneath the line of his chin. He swallowed. From the weight of it he had thought it was a tarantula—but this was worse, much worse. It was very black with a small head and an obscene, swollen body, like a fruit about to burst. He knew that if he could have turned it over, he would have found a red hourglass marking on its abdomen.

It was a black widow. *Latrodectus curacaviensis*. One of the deadliest spiders in the world.

The spider moved, its front legs reaching out so that one was almost touching the corner of Cossack's mouth. The other legs were still attached to his neck, with the main body of the spider now hanging under his jaw. He wanted to swallow again but he didn't dare. Any movement might alarm the creature, which anyway needed no excuse to attack. Cossack guessed that this was the female of the species: a thousand times worse than the male. If it decided to bite him, its hollow fangs would inject him with a neurotoxic venom which would paralyse his entire nervous system. He would feel nothing at first. There would just be two tiny red pricks on his skin. The pain—waves of it—would come in about an hour. His eyelids would swell. He would be unable to breathe. He would go into convulsions. Almost certainly he would die.

Cossack considered raising a hand and trying to flick the hideous thing off. If it had been anywhere else on his body he might have taken the chance. But it had settled on his throat, as if fascinated by the pulse it had found there. He wanted to call to Hunter, but he couldn't risk moving the muscles in his

neck. He was barely breathing. Hunter was still making the final adjustments, unaware of what was going on. What could he do?

In the end he whistled. It was the only sound he dared make. He was horribly aware of the creature hanging off him. He felt the prick of another leg, this time touching his lip. Was it about to climb onto his face?

Hunter looked round and saw at once that something was wrong. Cossack was standing unnaturally still, his head contorted, his face, underneath the paint, completely white. Hunter took a step so that Cossack now stood between him and the compound.

He had lowered the rifle, the muzzle pointing towards the ground.

Hunter saw the spider.

At the same moment, the door of the house opened and the Commander came out: a short, plump man dressed in a dark tunic hanging open at the collar. Unshaven, he was carrying a briefcase and smoking a cigarette.

Twenty steps to the helicopter—and he was already moving briskly, talking to the two bodyguards who accompanied him. Cossack's eyes flickered over to Hunter. He knew the organization that had employed them would not forgive failure, and this was the only chance they would get. The spider moved again and, looking down, Cossack saw its head: a cluster of tiny, gleaming eyes—half a dozen of them—gazing up at him, uglier than anything in the world.

His skin was itching. The whole side of his face wanted to peel itself away. But he knew that there was nothing Hunter could do. He had to fire now. The Commander was only ten steps away from the helicopter. The blades were already turning. Cossack wanted to scream at him. Do it! The sound of the gunshot would frighten the spider and it would bite. But that wasn't important. The mission had to succeed.

It took Hunter less than two seconds to make a decision. He could use the tip of the gun to brush away the black widow. He might succeed in getting rid of it before it bit Cossack. But by then the Commander would be in his helicopter, behind bulletproof glass. Or he could shoot the Commander. But once he had fired the gun, he would have to turn and run immediately, disappear into the jungle. There would be no time to help Cossack; there would be nothing he could do.

He made his decision, swept up the gun, aimed and fired.

The bullet, white-hot, flashed past, cutting a line in Cossack's neck. The black widow disintegrated instantly, blown apart by the force of the shot. The bullet continued across the clearing and through the fence and—still carrying tiny fragments of the black widow with it—

buried itself in the Commander's chest. The Commander had been about to climb into the helicopter. He stopped as if surprised, put a hand to his heart, and crumpled. The bodyguards twisted round, shouting, staring into the jungle, trying to see the enemy.

But Hunter and Cossack had already gone. The jungle swallowed them in seconds, although it was more than an hour before they stopped to catch their breath.

Cossack was bleeding. There was a red line that could have been drawn with a ruler across the side of his neck, and the blood had seeped down, soaking into his shirt. But the black widow hadn't bitten

him. He held out a hand, accepting a water bottle from Hunter, and drank.

“You saved my life,” he said.

Hunter considered. “To take a life and save a life with one bullet... that’s not bad going.”

Cossack would have the scar for the rest of his life. But that would not be a very long time. The life of the professional assassin is often short. Hunter would die first, in another country, on another mission. Later it would be his turn.

Right now he said nothing. They had done their job. That was all that mattered. He gave back the water bottle, and as the sun beat down and the jungle watched and reflected upon what had happened, the two men set off together, cutting and hacking their way through the mid-morning heat of another day.

NOT MY BUSINESS

Alex Rider lay on his back, drying out in the midday sun.

He could feel the salt water from his last swim trickling through his hair and evaporating off his chest. His shorts, still wet, clung to him. He was, at that moment, as happy as it is possible to be; one week into a holiday that had been perfect from the moment the plane had touched down in Montpellier and he had stepped out into the brilliance of his first Mediterranean day. He loved the South of France—the intense colours, the smells, the pace of life that hung onto every minute and refused to let go. He hadn't any idea what time it was, except that he was getting hungry and guessed it must soon be Lunch. There was a brief burst of music as a girl with a radio walked past, and Alex turned his head to follow her. And that was when the sun went in, the sea froze, and the whole world seemed to catch its breath.

He wasn't looking at the girl with the radio. He was looking past her, down to the sea wall that divided the beach from the jetty, where a yacht was just pulling in. The yacht was enormous, almost the size of one of the passenger boats that carried tourists up and down the coast. But no tourists would ever set foot on this craft. It was completely uninviting, cruising silently through the water, with tinted glass in the windows and a massive bow that rose up like a solid white wall. A man stood at the very front, staring straight ahead, his face blank. It was a face that Alex recognized instantly.

Yassen Gregorovich. It had to be.

Alex sat perfectly still, supporting himself on one arm, his hand half buried in the sand. As he watched, a man in his twenties appeared from the cabin and busied himself mooring the boat. He was short and apelike, wearing a string vest that showed off the tattoos which completely covered his arms and shoulders. A deckhand? Yassen made no offer to help him with his work.

A third man hurried along the jetty. He was fat and bald, dressed in a cheap white suit. The top of his head had been burnt by the sun and the skin had turned an ugly, cancerous red.

Yassen saw him and climbed down, moving like spilt oil. He was wearing blue jeans and a white shirt open at the neck. Other men might have had to struggle to keep their balance walking down the swaying gangplank, but he didn't even hesitate. There was something inhuman about him.

With his close-cropped hair, his hard blue eyes and pale, expressionless face, he was obviously no holidaymaker. But only Alex knew the truth about him. Yassen Gregorovich was a contract killer, the man who had murdered his uncle and changed his own Life. He was wanted all over the world.

So what was he doing here in a little seaside town on the edge of the marshes and lagoons that made up the Camargue? There was nothing in Saint-Pierre apart from beaches, campsites, too many restaurants and an oversized church that looked more like a fortress. It had taken Alex a week to get used to the quiet charm of the place. And now this!

“Alex? What are you looking at?” Sabina murmured, and Alex had to force himself to turn round, to remember that she was there.

“I’m...” The words wouldn’t come. He didn’t know what to say.

“Do you think you could rub a little more sunscreen into my back? I’m overheating...”

That was Sabina. Slim, dark-haired, and sometimes much older than her fifteen years. But then she was the sort of girl who had probably swapped toys for boys before she hit eleven. Although she was using factor 25, she seemed to need more sunscreen rubbed in every fifteen minutes, and somehow it was always Alex who had to do it for her. He glanced quickly at her back, which was in fact perfectly bronzed. She was wearing a bikini made out of so little material that it hadn’t bothered with a pattern. Her eyes were covered by a pair of fake Dior sunglasses (which she had bought for a tenth of the price of the real thing) and she had her head buried in *The Lord of the Rings*, at the same time waving the sunscreen.

Alex looked back at the yacht. Yassen was shaking hands with the bald man. The deckhand was standing near by, waiting. Even at this distance Alex could see that Yassen was very much in charge; that when he spoke, the two men listened. Alex had once seen Yassen shoot a man dead just for dropping a package. There was still an extraordinary coldness about him that seemed to neutralize even the Mediterranean sun. The strange thing was that there were very few people in the world who would have been able to recognize the Russian. Alex was one of them. Could Yassen’s being here have something to do with him?

“Alex...?” Sabina said.

The three men moved away from the boat, heading into the town. Suddenly Alex was on his feet.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“I need a drink.”

“I’ve got water.”

“No, I want a Coke.”

Even as he swept up his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, Alex knew that this was not a good idea. Yassen Gregorovich might have come to the Camargue because he wanted a holiday. He might have come to murder the local mayor. Either way, it had nothing to do with Alex and it would be crazy to get involved with Yassen again. Alex remembered the promise he had made the last time they had met, on a rooftop in central London.

You killed Ian Rider. One day I’ll kill you.

At the time he had meant it—but that had been then. Right now he didn’t want anything to do with Yassen or the world he represented.

And yet...

Yassen was here. He had to know why.

The three men were walking along the main road, following the line of the sea. Alex doubled back across the sand, passing the white concrete bullring that had struck him as bizarre when he’d first come here—until he had remembered that he was only about a hundred miles from Spain. There was

to be a bullfight tonight. People were already queuing at the tiny windows to buy tickets, but he and Sabina had decided they would keep well clear. "I hope the bull wins,"

had been Sabina's only comment.

Yassen and the two men turned left, disappearing into the town centre. Alex quickened his pace, knowing how easy it would be to lose them in the tangle of lanes and alleyways that surrounded the church. He didn't have to be too careful about being seen. Yassen thought he was safe. It was unlikely that, in a crowded holiday resort, he would notice anyone following him. But with Yassen you never knew. Alex felt his heart thumping with every step he took. His mouth was dry, and for once it wasn't the sun that was to blame.

Yassen had gone. Alex looked left and right. There were people crowding in on him from all sides, pouring out of the shops and into the open-air restaurants that were already serving lunch.

The smell of paella filled the air. He cursed himself for hanging back, for not daring to get any closer. The three men could have disappeared inside any of the buildings. Could it be, even, that he had imagined seeing them in the first place? It was a pleasant thought, but it was dashed a moment later when he caught sight of them sitting on a terrace in front of one of the smarter restaurants in the square, the bald man already calling for menus.

Alex walked in front of a shop selling postcards, using the racks as a screen between himself and the restaurant. Next came a café serving snacks and drinks beneath wide, multicoloured umbrellas. He edged into it. Yassen and the other two men were now less than ten metres away and Alex could make out more details. The deckhand was pushing bread into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten for a week. The bald man was talking quietly, urgently, waving his fist in the air to emphasize a point. Yassen was listening patiently. With the noise of the crowd all around, Alex couldn't make out a word any of them were saying. He peered round one of the umbrellas and a waiter almost collided with him, letting loose a torrent of angry French. Yassen glanced in his direction and Alex ducked away, afraid that he had drawn attention to himself.

A line of plants in wooden tubs divided the café from the restaurant terrace where the men were eating. Alex slipped between two of the tubs and moved quickly into the shadows of the restaurant interior. He felt safer here, less exposed. The kitchens were right behind him. To one side was a bar and in front of it about a dozen tables, all of them empty. Waiters were coming in and out with plates of food, but all the customers had chosen to eat outside.

Alex looked out through the door. And caught his breath. Yassen had got up and was walking purposefully towards him. Had he been spotted? But then he saw that Yassen was holding something: a mobile phone. He must have received a call and was coming into the restaurant to take it privately. Another few steps and he would reach the door. Alex looked around him and saw an alcove screened by a bead curtain. He pushed through it and found himself in a storage area just big enough to conceal him. Mops, buckets, cardboard boxes and empty wine bottles crowded around him. The beads shivered and became still.

Yassen was suddenly there.

"I arrived twenty minutes ago," he was saying. He was speaking English with only a very slight trace

of a Russian accent. “Franco was waiting for me. The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged.”

There was a pause. Alex tried not to breathe. He was centimetres away from Yassen, separated only by the fragile barrier of brightly coloured beads. But for the fact that it was so dark inside after the glare of the sun, Yassen would surely have seen him.

“We’ll do it this afternoon. You have nothing to worry about. It is better for us not to communicate. I will report to you on my return to England.”

Yassen Gregorovich clicked off the phone and suddenly became quite still. Alex actually saw the moment, the sudden alertness as some animal instinct told Yassen that he had been overheard.

The phone was still cradled inside the man’s hand, but it could have been a knife that he was about to throw. His head was still but his eyes glanced from side to side, searching for the enemy. Alex stayed where he was behind the beads, not daring to move. What should he do?

He was tempted to make a break for it, to run out into the open air. No. He would be dead before he had taken two steps. Yassen would kill him before he even knew who he was or why he had been there. Very slowly, Alex looked around for a weapon, for anything to defend himself with.

And then the kitchen door swung open and a waiter came out, swerving round Yassen and calling to someone at the same time. The stillness of the moment was shattered. Yassen slipped the phone into his trouser pocket and went out to rejoin the other men.

Alex let out a huge sigh of relief.

What had he learnt?

Yassen Gregorovich had come here to kill someone. He was sure of that much. The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged. But at least Alex hadn’t heard his own name mentioned. So he was right. The target was probably some Frenchman, living here in Saint-Pierre. It would happen sometime this afternoon. A gunshot or perhaps a knife flashing in the sun. A fleeting moment of violence and someone somewhere would sit back, knowing they had one enemy less.

What could he do?

Alex pushed through the bead curtain and made his way out of the back of the restaurant. He was relieved to find himself in the street, away from the square. Only now did he try to collect his thoughts. He could go to the police, of course. He could tell them that he was a spy who had worked, three times now, for MI6—British military intelligence. He could say that he had recognized Yassen, knew him for what he was, and that a killing would almost certainly take place that afternoon unless he was stopped. But what good would it do? The French police might understand him, but they would never believe him. He was a fourteen-year-old English schoolboy with sand in his hair and a suntan.

They would take one look at him and laugh.

He could go to Sabina and her parents. But Alex didn’t want to do that either. He was only here because they had invited him, and why should he bring murder into their holiday? Not that they would believe him any more than the police. Once, when he had been staying with her in Cornwall, Alex had tried to tell Sabina the truth. She had thought he was joking.

Alex looked around at the tourist shops, the ice-cream parlours, the crowds strolling happily along the street. It was a typical picture-postcard view. The real world. So what the hell was he doing getting mixed up again with spies and assassins?

He was on holiday. This was none of his business.

Let Yassen do whatever he wanted. Alex wouldn't be able to stop him even if he tried. Better to forget that he had ever seen him.

Alex took a deep breath and walked back down the road towards the beach to find Sabina and her parents. As he went he tried to work out what he would tell them: why he had left so suddenly and why he was no longer smiling now that he was back.

That afternoon, Alex and Sabina hitched a lift with a local farmer to Aigues-Mortes, a fortified town on the edge of the salt marshes. Sabina wanted to escape from her parents and hang out in a French café, where they could watch the locals and tourists rub shoulders in the street. She had devised a system for marking French teenagers for good looks—with points lost for weedy legs, crooked teeth or bad dress sense. Nobody had yet scored more than seven out of twenty and Alex would normally have been happy sitting with her, listening to her as she laughed out loud.

But not this afternoon.

Everything was out of focus. The great walls and towers that surrounded him were miles away, and the sightseers seemed to be moving too slowly, like a film that had run down. Alex wanted to enjoy being here. He wanted to feel part of the holiday again. But seeing Yassen had spoilt it all.

Alex had met Sabina only a month before, when the two of them had been helping at the Wimbledon tennis tournament, but they had struck up an immediate friendship. Sabina was an only child. Her mother, Liz, worked as a fashion designer; her father, Edward, was a journalist.

Alex hadn't seen very much of him. He had started the holiday late, coming down on the train from Paris, and had been working on some story ever since.

The family had rented a house just outside Saint-Pierre, right on the edge of a river, the Petit Rhone. It was a simple place, typical of the area: bright white with blue shutters and a roof of sun-baked terracotta tiles. There were three bedrooms and, on the ground floor, an airy, old-fashioned kitchen that opened onto an overgrown garden with a swimming pool and a tennis court with weeds pushing through the asphalt. Alex had loved it from the start. His bedroom overlooked the river, and every evening he and Sabina had spent hours sprawled over an old wicker sofa, talking quietly and watching the water ripple past.

The first week of the holiday had disappeared in a flash. They had swum in the pool and in the sea, which was less than a mile away. They had gone walking, climbing, canoeing and, once (it wasn't Alex's favourite sport), horse-riding. Alex really liked Sabina's parents. They were the sort of adults who hadn't forgotten that they had once been teenagers themselves, and more or less left him and Sabina to do whatever they wanted on their own. And for the last seven days everything had been fine.

Until Yassen.

The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged. We'll do it this afternoon...

What was the Russian planning to do in Saint-Pierre? What bad luck was it that had brought him here, casting his shadow once again over Alex's life? Despite the heat of the afternoon sun, Alex shivered.

"Alex?"

He realized that Sabina had been talking to him, and looked round. She was gazing across the table with a look of concern. "What are you thinking about?" she asked. "You were miles away."

"Nothing."

"You haven't been yourself all afternoon. Did something happen this morning? Where did you disappear to on the beach?"

"I told you. I just needed a drink." He hated having to lie to her but he couldn't tell her the truth.

"I was just saying we ought to get going. I promised we'd be home by five. Oh my God! Look at that one!" She pointed at another teenager walking past. "Four out of twenty. Aren't there any good-looking boys in France?" She glanced at Alex. "Apart from you, I mean."

"So how many do I get out of twenty?" Alex asked.

Sabina considered. "Twelve and a half," she said at last. "But don't worry, Alex. Another ten years and you'll be perfect."

Sometimes horror announces itself in the smallest of ways.

On this day it was a single police car, racing along the wide, empty road that twisted down to Saint-Pierre. Alex and Sabina were sitting in the back of the same truck that had brought them.

They were looking at a herd of cows grazing in one of the fields when the police car—blue and white with a light flashing on the roof—overtook them and tore off into the distance. Alex still had Yassen on his mind and the sight of it tightened the knot in the pit of his stomach. But it was only a police car. It didn't have to mean anything.

But then there was a helicopter, taking off from somewhere not so far away and arcing into the brilliant sky. Sabina saw it and pointed at it.

"Something's happened," she said. "That's just come from the town."

Had the helicopter come from the town? Alex wasn't so sure. He watched it sweep over them and disappear in the direction of Aigues-Mortes, and all the time his breaths were getting shorter and he felt the heavy weight of some nameless dread.

And then they turned a corner and Alex knew that his worst fears had come true—but in a way that he could never have foreseen.

Rubble, jagged brickwork and twisted steel. Thick black smoke curling into the sky. Their house had been blown apart. Just one wall remained intact, giving the cruel illusion that not too much damage

had been done. But the rest of it was gone. Alex saw a brass bed hanging at a crazy angle, somehow suspended in mid-air. A pair of blue shutters lay in the grass about fifty metres away. The water in the swimming pool was brown and scummy. The blast must have been immense.

A fleet of cars and vans was parked around the building. They belonged to the police, the hospital, the fire department and the anti-terrorist squad. To Alex they didn't look real: more like brightly coloured toys. In a foreign country, nothing looks more foreign than its emergency services.

“Mum! Dad!”

Alex heard Sabina shout the words and saw her leap out of the truck before they had stopped moving. Then she was running across the gravel drive, forcing her way between the officials in their different uniforms. The truck stopped and Alex climbed down, unsure whether his feet would come into contact with the ground or if he would simply go on, right through it. His head was spinning; he thought he was going to faint.

Nobody spoke to him as he continued forward. It was as if he wasn't there at all. Ahead of him he saw Sabina's mother appear from nowhere, her face streaked with ashes and tears, and he thought to himself that if she was all right, if she had been out of the house when the explosion happened, then maybe Edward Pleasure had escaped too. But then he saw Sabina begin to shake and fall into her mother's arms, and he knew the worst.

He drew nearer, in time to hear Liz's words as she clutched hold of her daughter.

“We still don't know what happened. Dad's been taken by helicopter to Montpellier. He's alive, Sabina, but he's badly injured. We're going to him now. You know your dad's a fighter. But the doctors aren't sure if he's going to make it or not. We just don't know...”

The smell of burning reached out to Alex and engulfed him. The smoke had blotted out the sun.

His eyes began to water and he fought for breath.

This was his fault.

He didn't know why it had happened but he was utterly certain who was responsible.

Yassen Gregorovich.

None of my business. That was what Alex had thought. This was the result.

THE FINGER ON THE TRIGGER

The policeman facing Alex was young, inexperienced, and struggling to find the right words. It wasn't just that he was having difficulty with the English language, Alex realized. Down here in this odd, quiet corner of France, the worst he would usually have to deal with would be the occasional drunk driver or maybe a tourist losing his wallet on the beach. This was a new situation and he was completely out of his depth.

"It is the most terrible affair," he was saying. "You have known Monsieur Pleasure very long time?"

"No. Not very long time," Alex said.

"He will receive the best treatment." The policeman smiled encouragingly. "Madame Pleasure and her daughter are going now to hospital but they have requested us to occupy us with you."

Alex was sitting on a folding chair in the shadow of a tree. It was just after five o'clock but the sun was still hot. The river flowed past a few metres away and he would have given anything to dive into the water and swim, and keep swimming, until he had put this whole business behind him.

Sabina and her mother had left about ten minutes ago and now he was on his own with this young policeman. He had been given a chair in the shade and a bottle of water, but it was obvious that nobody knew what to do with him. This wasn't his family. He had no right to be here. More officials had turned up: senior policemen, senior firemen. They were moving slowly through the wreckage, occasionally turning over a plank of wood or moving a piece of broken furniture as if they might uncover the one simple clue that would tell them why this had taken place.

"We have telephoned to your consul," the policeman was saying. "They will come to take you home. But they must send a representative from Lyon. It is a long way. So tonight you must wait here in Saint-Pierre."

"I know who did this," Alex said.

"Comment?"

"I know who was responsible." Alex glanced in the direction of the house. "You have to go into the town. There is a yacht tied to the jetty. I didn't see the name but you can't miss it. It's huge

... white. There's a man on the yacht; his name is Yassen Gregorovich. You have to arrest him before he can get away."

The policeman stared at Alex, astonished. Alex wondered how much he had understood.

"I am sorry? What is it that you say? This man, Yassen..."

"Yassen Gregorovich." "You know him?" "Yes."

"Who is he?"

“He’s a killer. He is paid to kill people. I saw him this morning.”

“Please!” The policeman held up a hand. He didn’t want to listen to any more. “Wait here.”

Alex watched him walk away towards the parked cars, presumably to find a senior officer. He took a sip of water, then stood up himself. He didn’t want to sit here watching the events from a folding chair like a picnicker. He walked towards the house. There was an evening breeze but the smell of burnt wood still hung heavily all around. A scrap of paper, scorched and blackened, blew across the gravel. On an impulse, Alex reached down and picked it up. He read: caviar for breakfast, and the swimming pool at his Wiltshire mansion is rumoured to have been built in the shape of Elvis Presley. But Damian Cray is more than the world’s richest and most successful pop star. His business ventures—including hotels, TV stations and computer games—have added millions more to his personal fortune.

The questions remain. Why was Cray in Paris earlier this week and why did he arrange a secret meeting with—

That was all there was. The paper turned black and the words disappeared.

Alex realized what he was looking at. It must be a page from the article that Edward Pleasure had been working on ever since he had arrived at the house. Something to do with the mega-celebrity Damian Cray...

“Excusez-moi, jeune homme...”

He looked up and saw that the policeman had returned with a second man, this one a few years older, with a downturned mouth and a small moustache. Alex’s heart sank. He recognized the type before the man had even spoken. Oily and self-important, and wearing a uniform that was too neat, there was disbelief etched all over his face.

“You have something to tell us?” he asked. He spoke better English than his colleague.

Alex repeated what he had said.

“How do you know about this man? The man on the boat.”

“He killed my uncle.”

“Who was your uncle?”

“He was a spy. He worked for MI6.” Alex took a deep breath. “I think I may have been the target of the bomb. I think he was trying to kill me...”

The two policemen spoke briefly together, then turned back to Alex. Alex knew what was coming. The senior policeman had rearranged his features so that he now looked down at Alex with a mixture of kindness and concern. But there was arrogance there too: I am right. You are wrong. And nothing will persuade me otherwise. He was like a bad teacher in a bad school, putting a cross beside a right answer.

“You have had a terrible shock,” the policeman said. “The explosion ... we already know that it was caused by a leak in the gas pipe.”

“No...” Alex shook his head.

The policeman held up a hand. "There is no reason why an assassin would wish to harm a family on holiday. But I understand. You are upset; it is quite possible that you are in shock. You do not know what it is you are saying."

"Please—"

"We have sent for someone from your consulate and he will arrive soon. Until then it would be better if you did not interfere."

Alex hung his head. "Do you mind if I go for a walk?" he said. The words came out low and muffled.

"A walk?"

"Just five minutes. I want to be on my own."

"Of course. Do not go too far. Would you like someone to accompany you?"

"No. I'll be all right."

He turned and walked away. He had avoided meeting the policemen's eyes and they doubtless thought he was ashamed of himself. That was all right. Alex didn't want them to see his fury, the black anger that coursed through him like an arctic river. They hadn't believed him! They had treated him like a stupid child!

With every step he took, images stamped themselves on his mind. Sabina's eyes widening as she took in the wreck of the house. Edward Pleasure being flown to some city hospital. Yassen Gregorovich on the deck of his yacht, gliding off into the sunset, another job done. And it was Alex's fault! That was the worst of it. That was the unforgivable part. Well, he wasn't going to sit there and take it. Alex allowed his rage to carry him forward. It was time to take control.

When he reached the main road, he glanced back. The policemen had forgotten him. He took one last look at the burnt-out shell that had been his holiday home, and the darkness rose up in him again. He turned away and began to run.

Saint-Pierre was just under a mile away. It was early evening by the time he arrived there and the streets were packed with people in a festive mood. In fact, the town seemed busier than ever.

Then he remembered. There was a bullfight tonight and people had driven in from all around to watch it.

The sun was already dipping behind the horizon but daylight still lingered in the air as if accidentally left behind. The street lamps were lit, throwing garish pools of orange onto the sandy pavements. An old carousel turned round and round, a spinning blur of electric bulbs and jangling music. Alex made his way through it all without stopping. Suddenly he was on the other side of the town and the streets were quiet again. The night had advanced and everything was a little more grey.

He hadn't expected to see the yacht. At the back of his mind he had thought that Yassen would have left long ago. But there it still was, moored where he had seen it earlier that day, a lifetime ago. There was nobody in sight. It seemed that the whole town had gone to the bullfight. Then a figure stepped out of the darkness and Alex saw the bald man with the sunburn. He was still dressed in the white suit. He was smoking a cigar, the smouldering tip casting a red glow across his face.

There were lights glinting behind the portholes of the boat. Would he find Yassen behind one of them? Alex had no real idea what he was doing. Anger was still driving him blindly on. All he knew was that he had to get onto the yacht and that nothing was going to stop him.

The man's name was Franco. He had stepped down onto the jetty because Yassen hated the smell of cigar smoke. He didn't like Yassen. More than that; he was afraid of him. When the Russian had heard that Edward Pleasure had been injured, not killed, he had said nothing, but there had been something intense and ugly in his eyes. For a moment he had looked at Raoul, the deckhand. It had been Raoul who had actually placed the bomb ... too far from the journalist's room, as it turned out. The mistake was his. And Franco knew that Yassen had very nearly killed him there and then. Perhaps he still would. God—what a mess!

Franco heard a shoe scraping against loose rubble and saw a boy walking towards him. He was slim and suntanned, wearing shorts and a faded Stone Age T-shirt, with a string of wooden beads around his neck. He had fair hair which hung in strands over his forehead. He must be a tourist—

he looked English. But what was he doing here?

Alex had wondered how close he could get to the man before his suspicions were aroused. If it had been an adult approaching the boat, it would have been a different matter; the fact that he was only fourteen was the main reason he had been so useful to MI6. People didn't notice him until it was too late.

That was what happened now. As the boy came closer, Franco was struck by the dark brown eyes set in a face that was somehow too serious for a boy of that age. They were eyes that had seen too much.

Alex drew level with Franco. At that moment, he lashed out, spinning round on the ball of his left foot, kicking with the right. Franco was taken completely by surprise. Alex's heel struck him hard in the stomach—but straight away Alex knew that he had underestimated his opponent. He had expected to feel soft fat beneath the flapping suit. But his foot had slammed into a ring of muscle, and although Franco was hurt and winded, he hadn't been brought down.

Franco dropped the cigar and lunged, his hand already scrabbling in his jacket pocket. It came out holding something. There was a soft click and seven inches of glinting silver leapt out of nowhere. He had a flick knife. Moving much faster than Alex would have thought possible, he launched himself across the jetty. His hand swung in an arc. Alex heard the blade slicing the air.

He swung again, and the knife flashed past Alex's face, missing him by a centimetre.

Alex was unarmed. Franco had obviously used the knife many times before, and if he hadn't been weakened by the first kick, this fight would already have been over. Alex looked around, searching for anything he could defend himself with. There was almost nothing on the jetty—just a few old boxes, a bucket, a fisherman's net.

Franco was moving more slowly now. He was fighting a kid—nothing more. The little brat might have surprised him with that first attack, but it would be easy enough to bring this to an end.

He muttered a few words in French: something low and ugly. Then, a second later, his fist swung through the air, this time carrying the knife in an upward arc that would have cut Alex's throat if he hadn't thrown himself backwards. Alex cried out.

He had lost his footing, falling heavily onto his back, one arm outstretched. Franco grinned, showing two gold teeth, and stepped towards him, anxious to finish this off. Too late he saw that he had been tricked. Alex's hand had caught hold of the net. As Franco loomed over him, he sprang up, swinging his arm forward with all his strength. The net spread out, falling over Franco's head, shoulder and knife hand. He swore and twisted round, trying to free himself, but the movement only entangled him all the more.

Alex knew he had to finish this quickly. Franco was still struggling with the net but Alex saw him open his mouth to call for help. They were right next to the yacht. If Yassen heard anything, there would be nothing more Alex could do. He took aim and kicked a second time, his foot driving into the man's stomach. The breath was knocked out of him; Alex saw his face turn red.

He was half out of the net, performing a bizarre dance on the edge of the jetty, when he lost his balance and fell. With his hands trapped he couldn't protect himself. His head hit the concrete with a loud crack and he lay still. Alex stood, breathing heavily. In the distance he heard a trumpet blare and there was a scattered round of applause. The bullfight was due to begin in ten minutes. A small band had arrived and was about to play. Alex looked at the unconscious man, knowing he had had a close escape. There was no sign of the knife; maybe it had fallen into the water. Briefly he wondered if he should go on. Then he thought of Sabina and her father, and the next thing he knew he had climbed the gangplank and was standing on the deck.

The boat was called Fer de Lance. Alex noticed the name as he climbed up, and remembered seeing it somewhere else. That was it! It was on a school trip to London Zoo. It was some sort of snake. Poisonous, of course. He was standing in a wide area with a steering wheel and controls next to a door on one side and leather sofas across the back. There was a low table. The bald man must have been sitting here before he went down for his smoke. Alex saw a crumpled magazine, a bottle of beer, a mobile phone and a gun.

He recognized the telephone. It was Yassen's. He had seen it in the Russian's hand back at the restaurant earlier that day. The phone was an odd colour—a shade of brown—otherwise Alex might have ignored it. But now he noticed that it was still turned on. He picked it up.

Alex quickly scrolled to the main menu and then to Call Register. He found what he was looking for: a record of all the calls Yassen had received that day. At 12.53 he had been talking to a number that began 44207. The 44 was England; the 207 meant it was somewhere in London.

That was the call Alex had overheard in the restaurant. Quickly he memorized the number. It was the number of the person who had given Yassen his orders. It would tell him all he needed to know.

He picked up the gun.

He finally had it. Each time he had worked for MI6 he had asked them to give him a gun, and each time they had refused. They had supplied him with gadgets—but only tranquillizer darts, stun grenades, smoke bombs. Nothing that would kill. Alex felt the power of the weapon he was holding.

He weighed it in his hand. The gun was a Grach MP-443, black, with a short muzzle and a ribbed stock. It was Russian, of course, new army issue. He allowed his finger to curl around the trigger and smiled grimly. Now he and Yassen were equals.

He padded forward, went through the door and climbed down a short flight of stairs that went below deck and into a corridor that seemed to run the length of the boat, with cabins on either side. He had seen a lounge above but he knew that it was empty. There had been no lights behind those windows. If Yassen was anywhere, he would be down here. Clutching the Grach more tightly, he crept along, his feet making no sound on the thickly carpeted floor.

He came to a door and saw a yellow strip of light seeping out of the crack below. Gritting his teeth, he reached for the handle, half hoping it would be locked. The handle turned and the door opened. Alex went in.

The cabin was surprisingly large, a long rectangle with a white carpet and modern wooden fittings along two of the walls. The third wall was taken up by a low double bed with a table and a lamp on each side. There was a man stretched out on the white cover, his eyes closed, as still as a corpse. Alex stepped forward. There was no sound in the room, but in the distance he could hear the band playing at the bullring: two or three trumpets, a tuba and a drum.

Yassen Gregorovich made no movement as Alex approached, the gun held out in front of him.

Alex reached the side of the bed. This was the closest he had ever been to the Russian, the man who had killed his uncle. He could see every detail of his face: the chiselled lips, the almost feminine eyelashes. The gun was only a centimetre from Yassen's forehead. This was where it ended. All he had to do was pull the trigger and it would be over.

“Good evening, Alex.”

It wasn't that Yassen had woken up. His eyes had been closed and now they weren't. It was as simple as that. His face hadn't changed. He knew who Alex was immediately, at the same time taking in the gun that was pointing at him. Taking it in and accepting it.

Alex said nothing. There was a slight tremble in the hand holding the gun and he brought his other hand up to steady it.

“You have my gun,” Yassen said.

Alex took a breath, “Do you intend to use it?”

Nothing

Yassen continued calmly. “I think you should consider very carefully. Killing a man is not like you see on the television. If you pull that trigger, you will fire a real bullet into real flesh and blood. I will feel nothing; I will be dead instantly. But you will live with what you have done for the rest of your life. You will never forget it.” He paused, letting his words hang in the air. “Do you really have it in you, Alex? Can you make your finger obey you? Can you kill me?” Alex was rigid, a statue. All his concentration was focused on the finger curled around the trigger. It was simple. There was a spring mechanism. The trigger would pull back the hammer and release it. The hammer would strike the bullet, a piece of death just nineteen milli-metres long, sending it on its short, fast journey into this man's head. He could do it. “Maybe you have forgotten what I once told you. This isn't your life. This

has nothing to do with you.” Yassen was totally relaxed. There was no emotion in his voice. He seemed to know Alex better than Alex knew himself. Alex tried to look away, to avoid the calm blue eyes that were watching him with something like pity.

“Why did you do it?” Alex demanded. “You blew up the house. Why?”

The eyes flickered briefly. “Because I was paid.”

“Paid to kill me?”

“No, Alex.” For a moment Yassen sounded almost amused. “It had nothing to do with you.”

“Then who—”

But it was too late.

He saw it in Yassen’s eyes first, knew that the Russian had been keeping him distracted as the cabin door opened quietly behind him. A pair of hands seized him and he was swung violently away from the bed. He saw Yassen whip aside as fast as a snake—as fast as a fer de lance. The gun went off, but Alex hadn’t fired it intentionally and the bullet smashed into the floor. He hit a wall and felt the gun drop out of his hand. He could taste blood in his mouth. The yacht seemed to be swaying.

In the far distance a fanfare sounded, followed by an echoing roar from the crowd. The bullfight had begun.

MATADOR

London greeted Alex like an old and reliable friend. Red buses, black cabs, blue-uniformed policemen and grey clouds ... could he be anywhere else? Walking down the King's Road, he felt a million miles from the Camargue—not just home, but back in the real world. The side of his stomach was still sore and he could feel the pressure of the bandage against his skin, but otherwise Yassen and the bullfight were already slipping into the distant past.

He stopped outside a bookshop which, like so many of them, advertised itself with the wafting smell of coffee. He paused for a moment, then went in.

He quickly found what he was looking for. There were three books on Damian Cray in the biography section. Two of these were hardly books at all—more glossy brochures put out by record companies to promote the man who had made them so many millions. The first was called Damian Cray—Live! It was stacked next to a book called Cray-zee! The Life and Times of Damian Cray. The same face stared out from the covers. Jet-black hair cut short like a schoolboy's. A very round face with prominent cheeks and brilliant green eyes. A small nose, almost too exactly placed right in the middle. Thick lips and perfect white teeth.

The third book had been written quite a few years later. The face was a little older, the eyes hidden behind blue-tinted spectacles, and this Damian Cray was climbing out of a white Rolls-Royce, wearing a Versace suit and tie. The title of the book showed what else had changed: Sir Damian Cray: The Man, The Music, The Millions. Alex glanced at the first page, but the heavy, complicated prose soon put him off. It seemed to have been written by someone who probably read the Financial Times for laughs.

In the end he didn't buy any of the books. He wanted to know more about Cray, but he didn't think these books would tell him anything he didn't know already. And certainly not why Cray's private telephone number had been on the mobile phone of a hired assassin.

Alex walked back through Chelsea, turning off down the pretty, white-fronted street where his uncle, Ian Rider, had lived. He now shared the house with Jack Starbright, an American girl who had once been the housekeeper but had since become his legal guardian and closest friend. She was the reason Alex had first agreed to work for MI6. He had been sent undercover to spy on Herod Sayle and his Stormbreaker computers. In return she had been given a visa which allowed her to stay in London and look after him.

She was waiting for him in the kitchen when he got in. He had agreed to be back by one and she had thrown together a quick lunch. Jack was a good cook but refused to make anything that took longer than ten minutes. She was twenty-eight years old, slim, with tangled red hair and the sort of face that couldn't help being cheerful, even when she was in a bad mood. "Had a good morning?" she asked as he came in. "Yes." Alex sat down slowly, holding his side. Jack noticed but said nothing. "I hope you're hungry," she went on. "What's for lunch?" "Stir-fry."

“It smells good.”

“It’s an old Chinese recipe. At least, that’s what it said on the packet. Help yourself to some Coke and I’ll serve up.”

The food was good and Alex tried to eat, but the truth was that he had no appetite and he soon gave up. Jack said nothing as he carried his half-finished plate over to the sink, but then she suddenly turned round.

“Alex, you can’t keep blaming yourself for what happened in France.”

Alex had been about to leave the kitchen but now he returned to the table.

“It’s about time you and I talked about this,” Jack went on. “In fact, it’s time we talked about everything!” She pushed her own plate of food away and waited until Alex had sat down. “All right. So it turns out that your uncle—Ian—wasn’t a bank manager. He was a spy. Well, it would have been nice if he’d mentioned it to me, but it’s too late now because he’s gone and got himself killed, which leaves me stuck here, looking after you.” She quickly held up a hand. “I didn’t mean that. I love being here. I love London. I even love you.

“But you’re not a spy, Alex. You know that. Even if Ian had some crazy idea about training you up. Three times now you’ve taken time off from school and each time you’ve come back a bit more bashed around. I don’t even want to know what you’ve been up to, but personally I’ve been worried sick!” “It wasn’t my choice...” Alex said. “That’s my point exactly. Spies and bullets and madmen who want to take over the world—it’s got nothing to do with you. So you were right to walk away in Saint-Pierre. You did the right thing.”

Alex shook his head. “I should have done something. Anything. If I had, Sabina’s dad would never—”

“You can’t know that. Even if you’d called the cops, what could they have done? Remember—nobody knew there was a bomb. Nobody knew who the target was. I don’t think it would have made any difference at all. And if you don’t mind my saying so, Alex, going after this guy Yassen on your own was frankly ... well, it was very dangerous. You’re lucky you weren’t killed.”

She was certainly right about that. Alex remembered the arena and saw again the horns and bloodshot eyes of the bull. He reached out for his glass and took a sip of Coke. “I still have to do something,” he said. “Edward Pleasure was writing an article about Damian Cray. Something about a secret meeting in Paris. Maybe he was buying drugs or something.”

But even as he spoke the words, Alex knew they couldn’t be true. Cray hated drugs. There had been advertising campaigns—posters and TV—using his name and face. His last album, *White Lines*, had contained four anti-drugs songs. He had made it a personal issue. “Maybe he’s into porn,” he suggested weakly.

“Whatever it is, it’s going to be hard to prove, Alex. The whole world loves Damian Cray.” Jack sighed. “Maybe you should talk to Mrs Jones.”

Alex felt his heart sink. He dreaded the thought of going back to MI6 and meeting the woman who was its deputy head of Special Operations. But he knew Jack was right. At least Mrs Jones would be able to investigate. “I suppose I could go and see her,” he said.

“Good. But just make sure she doesn’t get you involved. If Damian Cray is up to something, it’s her

business—not yours.”

The telephone rang.

There was a cordless phone in the kitchen and Jack took the call. She listened for a moment, then handed the receiver to Alex. “It’s Sabina,” she said. “For you.”

They met outside Tower Records in Piccadilly Circus and walked to a nearby Starbucks. Sabina was wearing grey trousers and a loose-fitting jersey. Alex had expected her to have changed in some way after all that had happened, and indeed she looked younger, less sure of herself. She was obviously tired. All traces of her South of France suntan had disappeared.

“Dad’s going to live,” she said as they sat down together with two bottles of juice. “The doctors are pretty sure about that. He’s strong and he kept himself fit. But...” Her voice trembled. “It’s going to take a long time, Alex. He’s still unconscious—and he was badly burnt.” She stopped and drank some of her juice. “The police said it was a gas leak. Can you believe that? Mum says she’s going to sue.”

“Who’s she going to sue?”

“The people who rented us the house. The gas board. The whole country. She’s furious...”

Alex said nothing. A gas leak. That was what the police had told him.

Sabina sighed. “Mum said I ought to see you. She said you’d want to know about Dad.”

“Your dad had just come down from Paris, hadn’t he?” Alex wasn’t sure this was the right time, but he had to know. “Did he say anything about the article he was writing?”

Sabina looked surprised. “No. He never talked about his work. Not to Mum. Not to anyone.”

“Where had he been?”

“He’d been staying with a friend. A photographer.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Marc Antonio. Why are you asking all these questions about my dad? Why do you want to know?”

Alex avoided the questions. “Where is he now?” he asked.

“In hospital in France. He’s not strong enough to travel. Mum’s still out there with him. I flew home on my own.”

Alex thought for a moment. This wasn’t a good idea. But he couldn’t keep silent. Not knowing what he did. “I think he should have a police guard,” he said.

“What?” Sabina stared at him. “Why? Are you saying ... it wasn’t a gas leak?”

Alex didn’t answer.

Sabina looked at him carefully, then came to a decision. “You’ve been asking a lot of questions,” she said. “Now it’s my turn. I don’t know what’s really going on, but Mum told me that after it happened, you ran away from the house.”

“How did she know?”

“The police told her. They said you had this idea that someone had tried to kill Dad ... and that it was someone you knew. And then you disappeared. They were searching everywhere for you.”

“I went to the police station at Saint-Pierre,” Alex said.

“But that wasn't until midnight. You were completely soaked and you had a cut and you were dressed in weird clothes...”

Alex had been questioned for an hour when he had finally shown up at the gendarmerie. A doctor had given him three stitches and bandaged up the wound. Then a policeman had brought him a change of clothes. The questions had only stopped with the arrival of the man from the British consulate in Lyons. The man, who had been elderly and efficient, seemed to know all about Alex. He had driven Alex to Montpellier Airport to catch the first flight the next day. He had no interest in what had happened. His only desire seemed to be to get Alex out of the country.

“What were you doing?” Sabina asked. “You say Dad needs protection. Is there something you know?”

“I can't really tell you—” Alex began.

“Stuff that!” Sabina said. “Of course you can tell me!”

“I can't. You wouldn't believe me.”

“If you don't tell me, Alex, I'm going to walk out of here and you'll never see me again. What is it that you know about my dad?”

In the end he told her. It was very simple. She hadn't given him any choice. And in a way he was glad. The secret had been with him too long and carrying it alone, he had begun to feel it weighing him down.

He began with the death of his uncle, his introduction to MI6, his training and his first meeting with Yassen Gregorovich at the Stormbreaker computer plant in Cornwall. He described, as briefly as he could, how he had been forced, twice more, to work for MI6—in the French Alps and off the coast of America. Then he told her what he had felt the moment he had seen Yassen on the beach at Saint-Pierre, how he had followed him to the restaurant, why in the end he had done nothing.

He thought he had skimmed over it all but in fact he talked for half an hour before arriving at his meeting with Yassen on the Fer de Lance. He had avoided looking directly at Sabina for much of the time as he talked, but when he reached the bullfight, describing how he had dressed up as a matador and walked out in front of a crowd of a thousand, he glanced up and met her eyes. She was looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. She almost seemed to hate him.

“I told you it wasn't easy to believe,” he concluded lamely.

“Alex...”

“I know the whole thing sounds mad. But that's what happened. I am so sorry about your dad.

I'm sorry I couldn't stop it from happening. But at least I know who was responsible.”

“Who?”

“Damian Cray.”

“The pop star?”

“Your dad was writing an article about him. I found a bit of it at the house. And his number was on Yassen’s mobile phone.”

“So Damian Cray wanted to kill my dad.”

“Yes.”

There was a long silence. Too long, Alex thought.

At last Sabina spoke again. “I’m sorry, Alex,” she said. “I have never heard so much crap in all my life.”

“Sab, I told you—”

“I know you said I wouldn’t believe it. But just because you said that, it doesn’t make it true!”

She shook her head. “How can you expect anyone to believe a story like that? Why can’t you tell me the truth?”

“It is the truth, Sab.”

Suddenly he knew what he had to do.

“And I can prove it.”

They took the tube across London to Liverpool Street Station and walked up the road to the building that Alex knew housed the Special Operations division of MI6. They found themselves standing in front of a tall, black-painted door, the sort that was designed to impress people coming in or leaving. Next to it, screwed into the brickwork, was a brass plaque with the words: ROYAL & GENERAL BANK PLC

LONDON

Sabina had seen it. She looked at Alex doubtfully. “Don’t worry,” Alex said. “The Royal & General Bank doesn’t exist. That’s just the sign they put on the door.”

They went in. The entrance hall was cold and businesslike, with high ceilings and a brown marble floor. To one side there was a leather sofa and Alex remembered sitting there the first time he had come, waiting to go up to his uncle’s office on the fifteenth floor. He walked straight across to the glass reception desk where a young woman was sitting with a microphone curving across her mouth, taking calls and greeting visitors at the same time. There was an older security officer in uniform and peaked cap next to her.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked, smiling at Alex and Sabina.

“Yes,” Alex said. “I’d like to see Mrs Jones.”

“Mrs Jones?” The young woman frowned. “Do you know what department she works in?”

“She works with Mr Blunt.”

“I’m sorry...” She turned to the security guard. “Do you know a Mrs Jones?”

“There’s a Miss Johnson,” the guard suggested. “She’s a cashier.”

Alex looked from one to the other. “You know who I mean,” he said. “Just tell her that Alex Rider is here—”

“There is no Mrs Jones working at this bank,” the receptionist interrupted.

“Alex...” Sabina began.

But Alex refused to give up. He leant forward so that he could speak confidentially. “I know this isn’t a bank,” he said. “This is MI6 Special Operations. Please could you—”

“Are you doing this as some sort of prank?” This time it was the security guard who was speaking. “What’s all this nonsense about MI6?” “Alex, let’s get out of here,” Sabina said. “No!”

Alex couldn’t believe what was happening. He didn’t even know exactly what it was that was happening. It had to be a mistake. These people were new. Or perhaps they needed some sort of password to allow him into the building. Of course. On his previous visits here, he had only ever come when he had been expected. Either that or he had been brought here against his will. This time he had come unannounced. That was why he wasn’t being allowed in.

“Listen,” Alex said. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to let just anyone in, but I’m not just anyone. I’m Alex Rider. I work with Mr Blunt and Mrs Jones. Could you please let her know I’m here?”

“There is no Mrs Jones,” the receptionist repeated helplessly.

“And I don’t know any Mr Blunt either,” the security guard added.

“Alex. Please...” Sabina was sounding more and more desperate. She really wanted to leave.

Alex turned to her. “They’re lying, Sabina,” he said. “I’ll show you.”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her over to the lift. He reached out and stabbed the call button.

“You stop right there!” The security guard stood up.

The receptionist reached out and pressed a button, presumably calling for help.

The lift didn’t come.

Alex saw the guard moving towards him. Still no lift. He looked around and noticed a corridor leading away, with a set of swing doors at the end. Perhaps there would be a staircase or another set of lifts somewhere else in the building. Pulling Sabina behind him, Alex set off down the corridor. He heard the security guard getting closer. He quickened his pace, searching for a way up.

He slammed through the double doors.

And stopped.

He was in a banking hall. It was huge, with a domed ceiling and advertisements on the walls for mortgages, savings schemes and personal loans. There were seven or eight glass windows arranged

along one side, with cashiers stamping documents and cashing cheques, while about a dozen customers—ordinary people off the street—waited in line. Two personal advisers, young men in smart suits, sat behind desks in the open-plan area. One of them was discussing pension schemes with an elderly couple. Alex heard the other answer his phone.

“Hello. This is the Royal & General Bank, Liverpool Street. Adam speaking. How may I help?”

A light flashed on above one of the windows. Number four. A man in a pinstripe suit went over to it and the queue shuffled forward.

Alex took all this in with one glance. He looked at Sabina. She was staring with a mixture of emotions on her face.

And then the security guard was there. “You’re not meant to come into the bank this way,” he said. “This is a staff entrance. Now, I want you to leave before you get yourself into real trouble.

I mean it! I don’t want to have to call the police, but that’s my job.”

“We’re going.” Sabina had stepped in and her voice was cold, definite. “Sab—”

“We’re going now.”

“You ought to look after your friend,” the security guard said. “He may think this sort of thing is funny, but it isn’t.”

Alex left—or rather allowed Sabina to lead him out. They went through a revolving door and out onto the street. Alex wondered what had happened. Why had he never seen the bank before?

Then he realized. The building was actually sandwiched between two streets with a quite separate front and back. He had always entered from the other side.

“Listen—” he began.

“No. You listen! I don’t know what’s going on inside your head. Maybe it’s because you don’t have parents. You have to draw attention to yourself by creating this ... fantasy! But just listen to yourself, Alex! I mean, it’s pretty sick. Schoolboy spies and Russian assassins and all the rest of it...”

“It’s got nothing to do with my parents,” Alex said, feeling anger well up inside him.

“But it’s got everything to do with mine. My dad gets hurt in an accident—”

“It wasn’t an accident, Sab.” He couldn’t stop himself. “Are you really so stupid that you think I’d make all this up?”

“Stupid? Are you calling me stupid?”

“I’m just saying that I thought we were friends. I thought you knew me...”

“Yes! I thought I knew you. But now I see I was wrong. I’ll tell you what’s stupid. Listening to you in the first place was stupid. Coming to see you was stupid. Ever getting to know you ... that was the most stupid thing of all.”

She turned and walked away in the direction of the station. In seconds she had gone, disappearing into the crowd.

“Alex...” a voice said behind him. It was a voice that he knew.

Mrs Jones was standing on the pavement. She had seen and heard everything that had taken place.

“Let her go,” she said. “I think we need to talk.”

SAINT OR SINGER?

The office was the same as it had always been. The same ordinary, modern furniture, the same view, the same man behind the same desk. Not for the first time, Alex found himself wondering about Alan Blunt, head of MI6 Special Operations. What had his journey to work been like today? Was there a suburban house with a nice, smiling wife and two children waving goodbye as he left to catch the tube? Did his family know the truth about him? Had he ever told them that he wasn't working for a bank or an insurance company or anything like that, and that he carried with him—perhaps in a smart leather case, given to him for his birthday—files and documents full of death? Alex tried to see the teenager in the man in the grey suit. Blunt must have been his own age once. He would have gone to school, sweated over exams, played football, tried his first cigarette and got bored at weekends like anybody else. But there was no sign of any child in the empty grey eyes, the colourless hair, the mottled, tightly drawn skin. So when had it happened?

What had turned him into a civil servant, a spy-master, an adult with no obvious emotions and no remorse?

And then Alex wondered if the same thing would one day happen to him. Was that what MI6 were preparing him for? First they had turned him into a spy; next they would turn him into one of them. Perhaps they already had an office waiting with his name on the door. The windows were closed and it was warm in the room, but he shuddered. He had been wrong to come here with Sabina. The office on Liverpool Street was poisonous, and one way or another it would destroy him if he didn't stay away.

“We couldn't allow you to bring that girl here, Alex,” Blunt was saying. “You know perfectly well that you can't just show off to your friends whenever—”

“I wasn't showing off,” Alex cut in. “Her dad was almost killed by a bomb in the South of France.”

“We know all about the business in Saint-Pierre,” Blunt murmured.

“Do you know that it was Yassen Gregorovich who planted it?”

Blunt sighed irritably. “That doesn't make any difference. It's none of your business. And it's certainly nothing to do with us!”

Alex stared at him in disbelief. “Sabina's father is a journalist,” he exclaimed. “He was writing about Damian Cray. If Cray wanted him dead, there must be a reason. Isn't it your job to find out?”

Blunt held up a hand for silence. His eyes, as always, showed nothing at all. Alex was struck by the thought that if this man were to die, sitting here at his desk, nobody would notice any difference.

“I have received a report from the police in Montpellier, and also from the British consulate,”

Blunt said. “This is standard practice when one of our people is involved.”

“I’m not one of your people,” Alex muttered.

“I am sorry that the father of your ... friend was hurt. But you might as well know that the French police have investigated—and you’re right. It wasn’t a gas leak.” “That’s what I was trying to tell you.”

“It turns out that a local terrorist organization—the CST—have claimed responsibility.”

“The CST?” Alex’s head spun. “Who are they?”

“They’re very new,” Mrs Jones explained. “CST stands for Camargue Sans Touristes.

Essentially they’re French nationalists who want to stop local houses in the Camargue being sold off for tourism and second homes.”

“It’s got nothing to do with the CST,” Alex insisted. “It was Yassen Gregorovich. I saw him and he admitted it. And he told me that the real target was Edward Pleasure. Why won’t you listen to what I’m saying? It was this article Edward was writing. Something about a meeting in Paris. It was Damian Cray who wanted him dead.”

There was a brief pause. Mrs Jones glanced at her boss as if needing his permission to speak. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Did Yassen mention Damian Cray?” she asked.

“No. But I found his private telephone number in Yassen’s phone. I rang it and I actually heard him speak.”

“You can’t know it was Damian Cray.”

“Well, that was the name he gave.”

“This is complete nonsense.” It was Blunt who had spoken and Alex was amazed to see that he was angry. It was the first time Alex had ever seen him show any emotion at all and it occurred to him that not many people dared to disagree with the chief executive of Special Operations.

Certainly not to his face.

“Why is it nonsense?”

“Because you’re talking about one of the most admired and respected entertainers in the country.

A man who has raised millions and millions of pounds for charity. Because you’re talking about Damian Cray!” Blunt sank back into his chair. For a moment he seemed undecided. Then he nodded briefly. “All right,” he said. “Since you have been of some use to us in the past, and since I want to clear this matter up once and for all, I will tell you everything we know about Cray.”

“We have extensive files on him,” Mrs Jones said.

“Why?”

“We keep extensive files on everyone who’s famous.”

“Go on.”

Blunt nodded again and Mrs Jones took over. She seemed to know all the facts by heart. Either she had read the files recently or, more probably, she had the sort of mind that never forgot anything.

“Damian Cray was born in north London on 5 October 1950,” she began. “That’s not his real name, by the way. He was christened Harold Eric Lunt. His father was Sir Arthur Lunt, who made his fortune building multi-storey car parks. As a child, Harold had a remarkable singing voice, and aged eleven he was sent to the Royal Academy of Music in London. In fact, he used to sing regularly there with another boy who also became famous. That was Elton John.

“But when he was thirteen, there was a terrible disaster. His parents were killed in a bizarre car accident.”

“What was bizarre about it?”

“The car fell on top of them. It rolled off the top floor of one of their car parks. As you can imagine, Harold was distraught. He left the Royal Academy and travelled the world. He changed his name and turned to Buddhism for a while. He also became a vegetarian. Even now, he never touches meat. The tickets for his concerts are made out of recycled paper. He has very strict values and he sticks to them.

“Anyway, he came back to England in the seventies and formed a band—Slam! They were an instant success. I’m sure the rest of this will be very familiar to you, Alex. At the end of the seventies the band split up, and Cray began a solo career which took him to new heights. His first solo album, Firelight, went platinum. After that he was seldom out of the UK or US top twenty.

He won five Grammys and an Academy Award for Best Original Song. In 1986 he visited Africa and decided to do something to help the people there. He arranged a concert at Wembley Stadium, with all proceeds going to charity. Chart Attack—that was what it was called. It was a huge success and that Christmas he released a single: „Something for the Children. It sold four million copies and he gave every penny away.

“That was just the beginning. Since the success of Chart Attack, Cray has campaigned tirelessly on a range of world issues. Save the rainforests; protect the ozone layer; end world debt. He’s built his own rehabilitation centres to help young people involved with drugs, and he spent two years fighting to have a laboratory closed down because it was experimenting on animals.

“In 1989 he performed in Belfast, and many people believe that this free concert was a step on the way towards peace in Northern Ireland. A year later he made two visits to Buckingham Palace. He was there on a Thursday to play a solo for Princess Diana’s birthday; and on the Friday he was back again to receive a knighthood from the Queen.

“Only last year he was on the cover of Time magazine. „Man of the Year. Saint or Singer? That was the headline. And that’s why your accusations are ridiculous, Alex. The whole world knows that Damian Cray is just about the closest thing we have to a living saint.”

“It was still his voice on the telephone,” Alex said.

“You heard someone give his name. You don’t know it was him.”

“I just don’t understand it!” Now Alex was angry, confused. “All right, we all like Damian Cray.

I know he's famous. But if there's a chance that he was involved with the bomb, why won't you at least investigate him?"

"Because we can't." It was Blunt who had spoken and the words came out flat and heavy. He cleared his throat. "Damian Cray is a multimillionaire. He's got a huge penthouse on the Thames and another place down in Wiltshire, just outside Bath."

"So what?"

"Rich people have connections and extremely rich people have very good connections indeed.

Since the nineties, Cray has been putting his money into a number of commercial ventures. He bought his own television station and made a number of programmes that are now shown all around the world. Then he branched out into hotels—and finally into computer games. He's about to launch a new game system. He calls it the Gameslayer, and apparently it will put all the other systems—PlayStation 2, GameCube, whatever—into the shade."

"I still don't see—"

"He is a major employer, Alex. He is a man of enormous influence. And, for what it's worth, he donated a million pounds to the government just before the last election. Now do you understand? If it was discovered that we were investigating him, and merely on your say-so, there would be a tremendous scandal. The prime minister doesn't like us anyway. He hates anything he can't control. He might even use an attack on Damian Cray as an excuse to close us down."

"Cray was on television only today," Mrs Jones said. She picked up a remote control. "Have a look at this and then tell me what you think."

A TV monitor in the corner of the room flickered on, and Alex found himself looking at a recording of the mid-morning news. He guessed Mrs Jones probably recorded the news every day.

She fast-forwarded, then ran the film at the correct speed.

And there was Damian Cray. His hair was neatly combed and he was wearing a dark, formal suit, white shirt and mauve silk tie. He was standing outside the American embassy in London's Grosvenor Square.

Mrs Jones turned up the sound.

"...the former pop singer, now tireless campaigner for a number of environmental and political issues, Damian Cray. He was in London to meet the president of the United States, who has just arrived in England as part of his summer vacation."

The picture switched to a jumbo jet landing at Heathrow Airport, then cut in closer to show the president standing at the open door, waving and smiling.

"The president arrived at Heathrow Airport in Air Force One, the presidential plane. He is due to have a formal lunch with the prime minister at number ten Downing Street today..."

Another cut. Now the president was standing next to Damian Cray and the two men were shaking hands, a long handshake for the benefit of the cameras which flashed all around them.

Cray had sandwiched the president's hand between both his own hands and seemed unwilling to let

him go. He said something and the president laughed.

“...but first he met Cray for an informal discussion at the American embassy in London. Cray is a spokesman for Greenpeace and has been leading the movement to prevent oil drilling in the wilds of Alaska, fearing the environmental damage this may cause. Although he made no promises, the president agreed to study the report which Greenpeace...”

Mrs Jones turned off the television.

“Do you see? The most powerful man in the world interrupts his holiday to meet Damian Cray.

And he sees Cray before he even visits the prime minister! That should give you the measure of the man. So tell me! What earthly reason could he have to blow up a house and perhaps kill a whole family?”

“That’s what I want you to find out.”

Blunt sniffed. “I think we should wait for the French police to get back to us,” he said. “They’re investigating the CST. Let’s see what they come up with.” “So you’re going to do nothing!” “I think we have explained, Alex.” “All right.” Alex stood up. He didn’t try to conceal his anger.

“You’ve made me look a complete fool in front of Sabina; you’ve made me lose one of my best friends. It’s really amazing. When you need me, you just pull me out of school and send me to the other side of the world. But when I need you, just this once, you pretend you don’t even exist and you just dump me out on the street...”

“You’re being over-emotional,” Blunt said.

“No, I’m not. But I’ll tell you this. If you won’t go after Cray, I will. He may be Father Christmas, Joan of Arc and the Pope all rolled into one, but it was his voice on the phone and I know he was somehow involved in what happened in the South of France. I’m going to prove it to you.”

Alex stood up and, without waiting to hear another word, left the room.

There was a long pause.

Blunt took out a pen and made a few notes on a sheet of paper. Then he looked at Mrs Jones.

“Well?” he demanded.

“Maybe we should go over the files one more time,” Mrs Jones suggested. “After all, Herod Sayle pretended to be a friend of the British people, and if it hadn’t been for Alex...”

“You can do what you like,” Blunt said. He drew a ring round the last sentence he had written.

Mrs Jones could see the words Yassen Gregorovich upside down on the page. “Curious that he should have run into Yassen a second time,” he muttered.

“And more curious still that Yassen didn’t kill him when he had the chance.”

“I wouldn’t say that, all things considered.”

Mrs Jones nodded. “Maybe we ought to tell Alex about Yassen,” she suggested.

“Absolutely not.” Blunt picked up the piece of paper and crumpled it. “The less Alex Rider knows

about Yassen Gregorovich the better. I very much hope the two of them don't run into each other again." He dropped the paper ball into the bin underneath his desk. At the end of the day everything in the bin would be incinerated.

"And that," he said, "is that."

Jack was worried.

Alex had come back from Liverpool Street in a bleak mood and had barely spoken a word to her since. He had come into the sitting room where she was reading a book and she had managed to learn that the meeting with Sabina hadn't gone well and that Alex wouldn't be seeing her again.

But during the afternoon she managed to coax more and more of the story out of him until finally she had the whole picture.

"They're all idiots!" Alex exclaimed. "I know they're wrong but just because I'm younger than them, they won't listen to me."

"I've told you before, Alex. You shouldn't be mixed up with them."

"I won't be. Never again. They don't give a damn about me."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll go," Alex said.

There was a white van parked outside. Two men were opening the back and, as Alex watched, they unloaded a brand-new bicycle, wheeling it down and over to the house. Alex cast his eye over it. The bike was a Cannondale Bad Boy, a mountain bike that had been adapted for the city with a lightweight aluminium frame and one-inch wheels. It was silver and seemed to have come equipped with all the accessories he could have asked for: Digital Evolution lights, a Blackburn mini-pump ... everything top of the range. Only the silver bell on the handlebar seemed old-fashioned and out of place. Alex ran his hand over the leather saddle with its twisting Celtic design and then along the frame, admiring the workmanship. There was no sign of any welds.

The bike was handmade and must have cost hundreds.

One of the men came over to him. "Alex Rider?" he asked.

"Yes. But I think there's been a mistake. I didn't order a bike."

"It's a gift. Here..."

The second man had left the bike propped up against the railings. Alex found himself holding a thick envelope. Jack appeared on the step behind him. "What is it?" she asked.

"Someone has given me a bike."

Alex opened the envelope. Inside was an instruction booklet and attached to it a letter.

Dear Alex,

I'm probably going to get a roasting for this, but I don't like the idea of you taking off on your own without any back-up. This is something I've been working on for you and you might as well have it now. I hope it comes in useful.

Look after yourself, dear boy. I'd hate to hear that anything lethal had happened to you.

All the best,

Smithers

PS This letter will self-destruct ten seconds after it comes into contact with the air so I hope you read it quickly!

Alex just had time to read the last sentence before the letters on the page faded and the paper itself crumpled and turned into white ash. He moved his hands apart and what was left of the letter blew away in the breeze. Meanwhile the two men had got back into the van and driven away. Alex was left with the bike. He flicked through the first pages of the instruction book.

BIKE PUMP—SMOKESCREEN

MAGNESIUM FLARE—HEADLAMP

HANDLEBAR—MISSILE EJECTION

TRAILRIDER—JERSEY (BULLETPROOF)

MAGNETIC—BICYCLE CLIPS

“Who is Smithers?” Jack asked. Alex had never told her about him.

“I was wrong,” Alex said. “I thought I had no friends at MI6. But it looks like I've got one.”

He wheeled the bicycle into the house. Smiling, Jack closed the door.

THE PLEASURE DOME

It was only in the cold light of morning that Alex began to see the impossibility of the task he had set himself. How was he supposed to investigate a man like Cray? Blunt had mentioned that he had homes in London and Wiltshire, but hadn't supplied addresses. Alex didn't even know if Cray was still in England.

But as it turned out, the morning news told Alex where he might begin.

When he came into the kitchen, Jack was reading the newspaper over her second cup of coffee.

She took one look at him, then slid it across the table. "This'll put you off your cornflakes."

Alex turned the paper round—and there it was on the second page: Damian Cray looking out at him. A headline ran below the picture:

Cray Launches £100m Gameslayer it's definitely the hottest ticket in London. Today—game players get to see the eagerly anticipated Gameslayer, developed by Cray Software Technology, a company based in Amsterdam, at a cost rumoured to be in excess of one hundred million pounds. The state-of-the-art game system will be demonstrated by Sir Damian Cray himself in front of an invited audience of journalists, friends, celebrities and industry experts.

No expense has been spared on the launch, which kicks off at one o'clock and includes a lavish champagne buffet inside the Pleasure Dome that Cray has constructed inside Hyde Park. This is the first time that a royal park has been used for a purely commercial venture and there were some critics when permission was given earlier this year.

But Damian Cray is no ordinary businessman. He has already announced that twenty per cent of profits from the Gameslayer will be going to charity, this time helping disabled children throughout the UK. Yesterday Cray met with the United States president to discuss oil drilling in Alaska. It is said that the Queen herself approved the temporary construction of the Pleasure Dome, which uses aluminium and PTFE fabric (the same material used in the Millennium Dome). Its futuristic design has certainly proved an eye-opener for passing Londoners.

Alex stopped reading. "We have to go," he said. "Do you want your eggs scrambled or boiled?"

"Jack..."

"Alex. It's a ticket-only event. What will we do?"

"I'll work something out."

Jack scowled. "Are you really sure about this?"

"I know, Jack. It's Damian Cray. Everyone loves him. But here's something they may not have noticed." He folded the paper and slid it back to her. "The terrorist group that claimed responsibility for the bomb in France was called Camargue Sans Touristes."

"I know."

“And this new computer game has been developed by Cray Software Technology.”

“What about it, Alex?”

“Maybe it’s just another coincidence. But CST... It’s the same letters.”

Jack nodded. “All right,” she said. “So how do we get in?”

They took a bus up to Knightsbridge and crossed over into Hyde Park. Before he had even passed through the gates and into the park itself, Alex could see just how much had been invested in the launch. There were hundreds of people streaming along the pavements, getting out of taxis and limousines, milling around in a crowd that seemed to cover every centimetre of grass. Policemen on foot and on horseback stood at every corner, giving directions and trying to form people into orderly lines. Alex was amazed that the horses could remain so calm surrounded by so much chaos.

And then there was the Pleasure Dome itself. It was as if a fantastic spaceship had landed in the middle of the lake at the centre of Hyde Park. It seemed to float on the surface of the water, a black pod, surrounded by a gleaming aluminium frame, silver rods criss-crossing in a dazzling pattern. Blue and red spotlights swivelled and rocked, the beams flashing even in the daylight. A single metal bridge stretched across from the bank to the entrance but there were more than a dozen security men barring the way. Nobody was allowed to cross the water without showing their ticket. There was no other way in.

Music blared out of hidden speakers: Cray singing from his last album, *White Lines*. Alex walked down to the edge of the water. He could hear shouting and, even in the hazy afternoon sun, he was almost blinded by a hundred flashbulbs all exploding at the same time. The mayor of London had just arrived and was waving at the press pack, at least a hundred strong, herded together into a pen next to the bridge. Alex looked around and realized that he knew quite a few of the faces converging on the Pleasure Dome. There were actors, television presenters, models, DJs, politicians ... all waving their invitations and queuing up to be let in. This was more than the first appearance of a new game system. It was the most exclusive party London had ever seen. And somehow he had to get in. He ignored a policeman who was trying to move him out of the way and continued towards the bridge, walking confidently, as if he had been invited. Jack was a few steps away from him and he nodded at her.

It had been Ian Rider, of course, who had taught him the basics of pickpocketing. At the time it had just been a game, shortly after Alex’s tenth birthday, when the two of them were together in Prague. They were talking about *Oliver Twist* and his uncle was explaining the techniques of the Artful Dodger, even providing his nephew with a quick demonstration. It was only much later that Alex had discovered that all this had been yet another aspect of his training; that all along his uncle had secretly been turning him into something he had never wanted to be.

But it would be useful now.

Alex was close to the bridge. He could see the invitations being checked by the burly men in their security uniforms: silver cards with the Gameslayer logo stamped in black. There was a natural crush here as the crowd arrived at the bottleneck and sorted itself into a single line to cross the bridge. He glanced one last time at Jack. She was ready.

Alex stopped.

“Somebody’s stolen my ticket!” he shouted.

Even with the music pounding out, his voice was loud enough to carry to the crowd in the immediate area. It was a classic pickpocket’s trick. Nobody cared about him, but suddenly they were worried about their own tickets. Alex saw one man pull open his jacket and glance into his inside pocket. Next to him a woman briefly opened and closed her handbag. Several people took their tickets out and clutched them tightly in their hands. A plump, bearded man reached round and tapped his back jeans pocket. Alex smiled. Now he knew where the tickets were.

He signalled to Jack. The plump man with the beard was going to be the mark—the one he had chosen. He was perfectly placed, just a few steps in front of Alex. And the corner of his ticket was actually visible, just poking out of the back pocket. Jack was going to play the part of the stall; Alex was in position to make the dip. Everything was set.

Jack walked ahead and seemed to recognize the man with the beard. “Harry!” she exclaimed, and threw her arms around him. “I’m not...” the man began. At that exact moment, Alex took two steps forward, swerved round a woman he vaguely recognized from a television drama series and slipped the ticket out of the man’s pocket and placed it quickly under his own jacket, holding it in place with the side of his arm. It had taken less than three seconds and Alex hadn’t even been particularly careful. This was the simple truth about pickpocketing. It demanded organization as much as skill. The mark was distracted. All his attention was on Jack, who was still embracing him. Pinch someone on the arm and they won’t notice it, at the same time, you’re touching their leg. That was what Ian Rider had taught Alex all those years ago.

“Don’t you remember me?” Jack was exclaiming. “We met at the Savoy!”

“No. I’m sorry. You’ve got the wrong person.”

Alex was already brushing past, on his way to the bridge. In a few moments the mark would reach for his ticket and find it missing, but even if he grabbed hold of Jack and accused her, there would be no evidence. Alex and the ticket would have disappeared.

He showed the ticket to a security man and stepped onto the bridge. Part of him felt bad about what he had done and he hoped the man with the beard would still be able to talk his way in.

Quietly he cursed Damian Cray for turning him into a thief. But he knew that, from the moment Cray had answered his call in the South of France, there could be no going back.

He crossed the bridge and gave the ticket up on the other side. Ahead of him was a triangular entrance. Alex stepped forward and went into the dome: a huge area fitted out with high-tech lighting and a raised stage with a giant plasma screen displaying the letters CST. There were already about five hundred guests spread out in front of it, drinking champagne and eating canapes. Waiters were circulating with bottles and trays. A sense of excitement buzzed all around.

The music stopped. The lighting changed and the screen went blank. Then there was a low hum and clouds of dry ice began to pour onto the stage. A single word—GAMESLAYER—appeared on the screen; the hum grew louder. The Gameslayer letters broke up as an animated figure appeared, a ninja warrior, dressed in black from head to toe, clinging to the screen like a cut-down version of

Spiderman. The hum was deafening now, a roaring desert wind with an orchestra somewhere behind. Hidden fans must have been turned on because real wind suddenly blasted through the dome, clearing away the smoke and revealing Damian Cray—in a white suit with a wide, pink and silver striped tie—standing alone on the stage, with his image, hugely magnified, on the screen behind.

The audience surged towards him, applauding. Cray raised a hand for silence.

“Welcome, welcome!” he said.

Alex found himself drawn towards the stage like everyone else. He wanted to get as close to Cray as he could. Already he was feeling that strange sensation of actually being in the same room as a man he had known all his life ... but a man he had never met. Damian Cray was smaller in real life than he seemed in his photographs. That was Alex's first thought.

Nevertheless, Cray had been an A-list celebrity for thirty years. His presence was huge and he radiated confidence and control.

“Today is the day that I launch the Gameslayer, my new games console,” Cray went on. He had a faint trace of an American accent. “I'd like to thank you all for coming. But if there's anyone here from Sony or Nintendo, I'm afraid I have bad news for you.” He paused and smiled.

“You're history.”

There was laughter and applause from the audience. Even Alex found himself smiling. Cray had a way of including people, as if he personally knew everyone in the crowd.

“Gameslayer offers graphic quality and detail like no other system on the planet,” Cray went on.

“It can generate worlds, characters and totally complex physical simulations in real time thanks to the floating-point processing power of the system, which is, in a word, massive. Other systems give you plastic dolls fighting cardboard cut-outs. With Gameslayer, hair, eyes, skin tones, water, wood, metal and smoke all look like the real thing. We obey the rules of gravity and friction. More than that, we've built something into the system that we call pain synthesis. What does this mean? In a minute you'll find out.”

He paused and the audience clapped again.

“Before I move on to the demonstration, I wonder if any of the journalists among you have any questions?”

A man near the front raised his hand. “How many games are you releasing this year?”

“Right now we only have the one game,” Cray replied. “But there will be twelve more in the shops by Christmas.”

“What is the first game called?” someone asked.

“Feathered Serpent.”

“Is it a shoot-,em-up?” a woman asked.

“Well, yes. It is a stealth game,” Cray admitted.

“So it involves shooting?”

“Yes.”

The woman smiled, but not humorously. She was in her forties, with grey hair and a severe, schoolteacher face. “It’s well known that you have a dislike of violence,” she said. “So how can you justify selling children violent games?”

A ripple of unease ran through the audience. The woman might be a journalist, but somehow it seemed wrong to question Cray in this manner. Not when you were drinking his champagne and eating his food.

Cray, however, didn’t seem offended. “That’s a good question,” he replied in his soft, lilting voice. “And I’ll tell you, when we began with the Gameslayer, we did develop a game where the hero had to collect different-coloured flowers from a garden and then arrange them in vases. It had bunnies and egg sandwiches too. But do you know what? Our research team discovered that modern teenagers didn’t want to play it. Can you imagine? They told me we wouldn’t sell a single copy!”

Everyone broke into laughter. Now it was the female journalist who was looking uncomfortable.

Cray held up a hand again. “Actually, you’ve made a fair point,” he went on. “It’s true—I hate violence. Real violence ... war. But, you know, modern kids do have a lot of aggression in them.

That’s the truth of it. I suppose it’s human nature. And I’ve come to think that it’s better for them to get rid of that aggression playing harmless computer games, like mine, than out on the street.”

“Your games still encourage violence!” the woman insisted.

Damian Cray frowned. “I think I’ve answered your question. So maybe you should stop questioning my answer,” he said.

This was greeted by more applause, and Cray waited until it had died down. “But now, enough talk,” he said. “I want you to see Gameslayer for yourself, and the best way to see it is to play it.

I wonder if we have any teenagers in the audience, although now I come to think of it, I don’t remember inviting any...”

“There’s one here!” someone shouted, and Alex felt himself pushed forward. Suddenly everyone was looking at him and Cray himself was peering down from the stage.

“No...” Alex started to protest.

But the audience was already clapping, urging him on. A corridor opened up in front of him.

Alex stumbled forward and before he knew it he was climbing up onto the stage. The room seemed to tilt. A spotlight spun round, dazzling him. And there it was.

He was standing on the stage with Damian Cray.

FEATHERED SERPENT

It was the last thing Alex could have expected.

He was face to face with the man who—if he was right—had ordered the death of Sabina's father. But was he right? For the first time, he was able to examine Cray at close quarters. It was a strangely unsettling experience.

Cray had one of the most famous faces in the world. Alex had seen it on CD covers, on posters, in newspapers and magazines, on television ... even on the back of cereal packets. And yet the face in front of him now was somehow disappointing. It was less real than all the images he had seen.

Cray was surprisingly young-looking, considering he was already in his fifties, but there was a taut, shiny quality to his skin that whispered of plastic surgery. And surely the neat, jet-black hair had to be dyed. Even the bright green eyes seemed somehow lifeless. Cray was a very small man. Alex found himself thinking of a doll in a toyshop. That was what Cray reminded him of.

His superstardom and his millions of pounds had turned him into a plastic replica of himself.

And yet...

Cray had welcomed him onto the stage and was beaming at him as if he were an old friend. He was a singer. And, as he had made clear, he opposed violence. He wanted to save the world, not destroy it. MI6 had gathered files on him and found nothing. Alex was here because of a voice, a few words spoken at the end of a phone. He was beginning to wish he had never come.

It seemed that the two of them had been standing there for ages, up on the stage with hundreds of people waiting to see the demonstration. In fact, only a few seconds had passed. Then Cray held out a hand. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Alex Rider."

"Well, it's great to meet you, Alex Rider. I'm Damian Cray."

They shook hands. Alex couldn't help thinking that there were millions of people all around the world who would give anything to be where he was now.

"How old are you, Alex?" Cray asked.

"Fourteen."

"I'm very grateful to you for coming. Thanks for agreeing to help."

The words were being amplified around the dome. Out of the corner of his eye, Alex saw that his own image had joined Cray's on the giant screen. "We're very lucky that we do indeed have a teenager," Cray went on, addressing the audience. "So let's see how ... Alex ... gets on with the first level of

Gameslayer One: Feathered Serpent.”

As Cray spoke, three technicians came onto the stage, bringing with them a television monitor, a games console, a table and a chair. Alex realized that he was going to be asked to play the game in front of the audience—with his progress beamed up onto the plasma screen.

“Feathered Serpent is based on the Aztec civilization,” Cray explained to the audience. “The Aztecs arrived in Mexico in 1195, but some claim that they had in fact come from another planet. It is on that planet that Alex is about to find himself. His mission is to find the four missing suns. But first he must enter the temple of Tlaloc, fight his way through five chambers and then throw himself into the pool of sacred flame. This will take him to the next level.”

A fourth technician had come onto the stage, carrying a webcam. He stopped in front of Alex and quickly scanned him, pressed a button on the side of the camera and left. Cray waited until he had gone.

“You may have been wondering about the little black-suited figure that you saw on the screen,” he said, once again taking the audience into his confidence. “His name is Omni, and he will be the hero of all the Gameslayer games. You may think him a little dull and unimaginative. But Omni is every boy and every girl in Britain. He is every child in the world . . . and now I will show you why!”

The screen went blank, then burst into a digital whirl of colour. There was a deafening fanfare—not trumpets but some electronic equivalent—and the gates of a temple with a huge Aztec face cut into the wood appeared. Alex could tell at once that the graphic detail of the Gameslayer was better than anything he had ever seen, but a moment later the audience gasped with surprise and Alex perfectly understood why. A boy had walked onto the screen and was standing in front of the gates, awaiting his command. The boy was Omni. But he had changed. He was now wearing exactly the same clothes as Alex. He looked like Alex. More than that, he was Alex right down to the brown eyes and the hanging strands of fair hair.

Applause exploded around the room. Alex could see journalists scribbling in their notebooks or talking quickly into mobile phones, hoping to be the first with this incredible scoop. The food and the champagne had been forgotten. Cray’s technology had created an avatar, an electronic double of him, making it possible for any player not just to play the game but to become part of it. Alex knew then that the Gameslayer would sell all over the world. Cray would make millions.

And twenty per cent of that would go to charity, he reminded himself.

Could this man really be his enemy?

Cray waited until everyone was quiet, and then he turned to Alex. “It’s time to play,” he said.

Alex sat down in front of the computer screen that the technicians had set up. He took hold of the controller and pressed with his left thumb. In front of him and on the giant plasma screen, his other self walked to the right. He stopped and turned himself the other way. The controller was incredibly sensitive. Alex almost felt like an Aztec god, in total control of his mortal self.

“Don’t worry if you get killed on your first go,” Cray said. “The console is faster than anything on the market and it may take you a while to get used to it. But we’re all on your side, Alex.

So—let’s play Feathered Serpent! Let’s see how far you can go!”

The temple gates opened.

Alex pressed down and on the screen his avatar walked forward and into a game environment that was alien and bizarre and brilliantly realized. The temple was a fusion of primitive art and science fiction, with towering columns, flaming beacons, complex hieroglyphics and crouching Aztec statues. But the floor was silver, not stone. Strange metal stairways and corridors twisted around the temple area. Electric light flickered behind heavily barred windows. Closed-circuit cameras followed his every move.

“You have to start by finding two weapons in the first chamber,” Cray advised, leaning over Alex’s shoulder. “You may need them later.”

The first chamber was huge, with organ music throbbing and stained-glass windows showing cornfields, crop circles and hovering spaceships. Alex found the first weapon easily enough.

There was a sword hanging high up on a wall. But he soon realized there were traps everywhere.

Part of the wall crumbled as he climbed it and reaching out for the sword activated a missile which shot out of nowhere, aiming for the avatar. The missile was a double boomerang with razor-blade edges, rotating at lightning speed. Alex knew that if he was hit, he would be cut in half.

He stabbed down with his thumbs and his miniature self crouched. The boomerang spun past.

But as it went, one of its blades caught the avatar on the arm. The audience gasped. A tiny flow of blood had appeared on the miniature figure’s sleeve and its face—Alex’s face—had distorted, showing pain. The experience was so realistic that Alex almost felt a need to check his own, real arm. He had to remind himself that it was only the avatar that had been wounded.

“Pain synthesis!” Cray repeated the words, his voice echoing across the Pleasure Dome. “In the Gameslayer world, we share all the hero’s emotions. And should Alex die, the central processing unit will ensure that we feel his death.”

Alex had climbed back down and was searching for the second weapon. The little wound was already healing, the blood flow slowing down. He dodged as another boomerang shot past his shoulder. But he still couldn’t find the second weapon.

“Try looking behind the ivy,” Cray suggested in a stage whisper, and the audience smiled, amused that Alex needed help so soon.

There was a crossbow concealed in an alcove. But what Cray hadn’t told Alex was that the ivy covering the alcove contained a ten thousand volt charge. He found out soon enough. The moment his avatar touched the ivy, there was a blue flash and it was thrown backwards, screaming out loud, its eyes wide and staring. The avatar hadn’t quite been killed, but it had been badly hurt.

Cray tapped Alex on the shoulder. “You’ll have to be more careful than that,” he said.

A buzz of excitement travelled through the audience. They had never seen anything like this before.

And that was when Alex decided. Suddenly MI6, Yassen, Saint-Pierre ... all of it was forgotten.

Cray had tricked him into touching the ivy. He had deliberately injured him. Of course, it was just a game. It was only the avatar that had been hurt. But the humiliation had been his—and suddenly he

was determined to get the better of Feathered Serpent. He wasn't going to be beaten.

He wasn't going to share his death with anyone.

Grimly, he picked up the crossbow and sent the avatar forward, further into the Aztec world.

The second chamber consisted of a huge hole in the ground. It was actually a pit, fifty metres deep, with narrow pillars stretching all the way to the top. The only way to get from one side to the other was to jump from one pillar to the next. If he missed his step or overbalanced, he would fall to his death—and to make it more difficult it was pouring with rain inside the chamber, making the surfaces slippery. The rain itself was extraordinary. As Cray told the audience, the Gameslayer's image technology allowed every raindrop to be realized individually. The avatar was soaking wet, its clothes sodden and its hair plastered to its head.

There was a sudden electronic squawk. A creature with butterfly wings and the face and claws of a dragon swooped down, trying to knock the avatar off its perch. Alex brought the crossbow up and shot it, then took the last three leaps to the other side of the pit.

“You're doing very well,” Damian Cray said. “But I wonder if you'll make it through the third chamber.”

Alex was confident. Feathered Serpent was beautifully designed. Its texture maps and backgrounds were perfect. The Omni character was way ahead of the competition. But for all this, it was just another computer game, similar to ones that Alex had played on Xbox and PlayStation 2. He knew what he was doing. He could win.

He made easy work of the third section: a tall, narrow corridor with carved faces on either side.

A hail of wooden spears and arrows fired out of the wooden mouths but not one of them came close as the avatar ducked and weaved, all the time running forward. A bubbling river of acid twisted along the corridor. The avatar jumped over it as if it were a harmless stream.

Now he came to an incredible indoor jungle where the greatest threat, among the trees and the creepers, was a huge robotic snake, covered in spikes. The creature looked horrific. Alex had never seen better graphics. But his avatar ran circles round it, leaving it behind so quickly that the audience barely had a chance to see it.

Cray's face hadn't changed, but now he was leaning over Alex, his eyes fixed on the screen, one hand resting on Alex's shoulder. His knuckles were almost white.

“You're making it look too easy,” he murmured.

Although the words were spoken light-heartedly, there was a rising tension in his voice.

Because the audience was now on Alex's side. Millions of pounds had been spent on the development of the Feathered Serpent software. But it was being beaten by the first teenager to play it. As Alex dodged a second robotic snake, someone laughed. The hand on his shoulder tightened.

He came to the fifth chamber. This was a mirror maze, filled with smoke and guarded by a dozen Aztec gods wrapped in feathers, jewellery and golden masks. Again, each and every one of the gods was a small masterpiece of graphic art. But although they lunged at the avatar, they kept on missing,

and suddenly more of the people in the audience were laughing and applauding, urging Alex on.

One more god, this one with claws and an alligator tail, stood between Alex and the pool of fire that would lead him to the next level. All he had to do was get past it. That was when Cray made his move. He was careful. Nobody would see what happened and if they did it would simply look as if he was carried away by the excitement of the game. But he was quite deliberate. His hand suddenly moved to Alex's arm and closed tight, pulling it away from the controller. For a few brief seconds, Alex lost control. It was enough. The Aztec god reached out and its claws raked across the avatar's stomach. Alex actually heard his shirt being torn; he almost felt the pain as the blood poured out. His avatar fell to its knees, then pitched forward and lay still. The screen froze and the words GAME OVER appeared in red letters.

Silence fell inside the dome.

"Too bad, Alex," Cray said. "I'm afraid it wasn't quite as easy as you thought."

There was a scattering of applause from the audience. It was hard to tell if they were applauding the technology of the game or the way Alex had taken it on and almost beaten it. But there was also a sense of unease. Perhaps Feathered Serpent was too realistic. It really was as if a part of Alex had died there, on the screen.

Alex turned to Cray. He was angry. He alone knew that the man had cheated. But Cray was smiling again.

"You did great," he said. "I asked for a demonstration and you certainly gave us one. You make sure you leave your address with one of my assistants. I'll be sending you a free Gameslayer system and all the introductory games."

The audience heard this and applauded with more enthusiasm. For a second time, Cray held out a hand. Alex hesitated for a moment, then took it. In a way, he couldn't blame Cray. The man couldn't allow the Gameslayer to be turned into a laughing stock on its first outing. He had an investment to protect. But Alex still didn't like what had happened.

"Good to meet you, Alex. Well done..."

He climbed down from the stage. There were more demonstrations and more talks by members of Cray's staff. Then lunch was served. But Alex didn't eat. He had seen enough. He left the Pleasure Dome and crossed over the water, walking back through the park and all the way down to the King's Road.

Jack was waiting for him when he got home.

"So how did it go?" she asked.

Alex told her.

"What a cheater!" Jack scowled. "Mind you, Alex. A lot of rich men are bad losers and Cray is very rich indeed. Do you really think this proves anything?"

"I don't know, Jack." Alex was confused. He had to remind himself: a great chunk of the Gameslayer profits was going to charity. A huge amount. And he still had no proof. A few words on a phone. Was it enough to tie Cray in with what had happened in Saint-Pierre? "Maybe we should go to Paris," he

said. “That was where this all began. There was a meeting. Edward Pleasure was there. He was working with a photographer. Sabina told me his name. Marc Antonio.”

“With a name like that, he should be easy enough to track down,” Jack said. “And I love Paris.”

“It still might be a waste of time.” Alex sighed. “I didn’t like Damian Cray. But now that I’ve met him...” His voice trailed off. “He’s an entertainer. He makes computer games. He didn’t look like the sort of man who’d want to hurt anyone.”

“It’s your call, Alex.”

Alex shook his head. “I don’t know, Jack. I just don’t know...”

The launch of the Gameslayer was on the news that night. According to the reports, the entire industry had been knocked out by the graphic quality and the processing power of the new system. The part that Alex had played in the demonstration wasn’t mentioned. However, something else was.

An event had taken place that had cast a cloud over what would otherwise have been a perfect day. It seemed that someone had died. A picture flashed up onto the screen, a woman’s face, and—

Alex recognized her at once. It was the school-teacherly woman who had put Cray on the spot, asking him awkward questions about violence. A policeman explained that she had been run over by a car as she left Hyde Park. The driver hadn’t stopped.

The following morning Alex and Jack went to Waterloo and bought two tickets for Eurostar.

By lunchtime they were in Paris.

RUE BRITANNIA

“Do you realize, Alex,” Jack said, “Picasso sat exactly where we’re sitting now. And Chagall. And Salvador Dali...”

“At this very table?”

“At this very café. All the big artists came here.”

“What are you trying to say, Jack?”

“Well, I was just wondering if you’d like to forget this whole adventure thing and come with me to the Picasso Museum. Paris is such a fun place. And I’ve always found looking at pictures a lot more enjoyable than getting shot.”

“Nobody’s shooting at us.”

“Yet.”

A day had passed since they had arrived in Paris and booked into a little hotel that Jack knew, opposite Notre-Dame. Jack knew the city well. She had once spent a year at the Sorbonne, studying art. But for the death of Ian Rider and her involvement with Alex, she might well have gone to live there.

She had been right about one thing. Finding out where Marc Antonio lived had been easy enough. She had only telephoned three agencies before she found the one that represented the photographer, although it had taken all her charm—and rusty French—to cajole his telephone number out of the girl on the switchboard. Getting to meet him, however, was proving more difficult.

She had rung the number a dozen times during the course of the morning before it was answered.

It was a man’s voice. No, he wasn’t Marc Antonio. Yes, this was Marc Antonio’s house but he had no idea where he was. The voice was full of suspicion. Alex had been listening, sharing the receiver with Jack. In the end he took over.

“Listen,” he said. His French was almost as good as Jack’s, but then he had started learning when he was three years old. “My name is Alex Rider. I’m a friend of Edward Pleasure. He’s an English journalist—”

“I know who he is.”

“Do you know what happened to him?”

A pause. “Go on...”

“I have to speak to Marc Antonio. I have some important information.” Alex considered for a moment. Should he tell this man what he knew? “It’s about Damian Cray,” he said.

The name seemed to have an effect. There was another pause, longer this time. Then...

“Come to la Palette. It’s a café on the rue de Seine. I will meet you there at one o’clock.”

There was a click as the man hung up.

It was now ten past one. La Palette was a small, bustling café on the corner of a square, surrounded by art galleries. Waiters with long white aprons were sweeping in and out, carrying trays laden with drinks high above their heads. The place was packed but Alex and Jack had managed to get a table right on the edge, where they would be most conspicuous. Jack was drinking a glass of beer; Alex had a bright red fruit juice—a sirop de grenadine—with ice. It was his favourite drink when he was in France.

He was beginning to wonder if the man he had spoken to on the telephone was going to show up.

Or could he be here already? How were they going to find each other in this crowd? Then he noticed a motorcyclist sitting on a beaten-up Piaggio 125cc motorbike on the other side of the street; he was a young man in a leather jacket with black curly hair and stubble on his cheeks. He had pulled in a few minutes before but hadn’t dismounted, as if he was waiting for someone.

Alex met his eye; there was a flash of contact. The young man looked puzzled but then he got off his bike and came over, moving warily as if afraid of a trap.

“You are Alex Rider?” he asked. He spoke English with an attractive accent, like an actor in a film.

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t expecting a child.”

“What difference does it make?” Jack demanded, coming to Alex’s defence. “Are you Marc Antonio?” she asked.

“No. My name is Robert Guppy.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“He asked me to take you to him.” Guppy glanced back at the Piaggio. “But I have only room for one.”

“Well, you can forget it. I’m not letting Alex go on his own.”

“It’s all right, Jack,” Alex cut in. He smiled at her. “It looks like you get to visit the Picasso Museum after all.”

Jack sighed. Then she nodded. “All right,” she said. “But take care.”

Robert Guppy drove through Paris like someone who knew the city well—or who wanted to die in it. He swerved in and out of the traffic, ignored red lights and spun across intersections with the blare of car horns echoing all around. Alex found himself clinging on for dear life. He had no idea where they were going but realized there was a reason for Guppy’s dangerous driving. He was making sure they weren’t being followed.

They slowed down on the other side of the Seine, on the edge of the Marais, close to the Forum des Halles. Alex recognized the area. The last time he had been here, he had called himself Alex Friend

and had been accompanying the hideous Mrs Stellenbosch on the way to the Point Blanc Academy. Now they slowed down and stopped in a street of typically Parisian houses—six storeys high with solid-looking doorways and tall frosted windows. Alex noticed a street sign: rue Britannia. The street went nowhere and half the buildings looked empty and dilapidated.

Indeed, the ones at the far end were shored up by scaffolding and surrounded by wheelbarrows and cement mixers, with a plastic chute for debris.

But there were no workmen in sight.

Guppy got off the bike. He gestured at one of the doors. “This way,” he said. He glanced up and down the street one last time, then led Alex in.

The door led to an inner courtyard with old furniture and a tangle of rusting bicycles in one corner. Alex followed Guppy up a short flight of steps and through another doorway. He found himself in a large, high-ceilinged room with whitewashed walls, windows on both sides and a dark wood floor. It was a photographer’s studio. There were screens, complicated lamps on metal legs and silver umbrellas. But someone was also living here. To one side was a kitchen area with a pile of tins and dirty plates.

Robert Guppy closed the door and a man appeared from behind one of the screens. He was barefoot, wearing a string vest and shapeless jeans. Alex guessed he must be about fifty. He was thin, unshaven, with a tangle of hair that was black mixed with silver. Strangely, he only had one eye; the other was behind a patch. A one-eyed photographer? Alex couldn’t see why not.

The man glanced at him curiously, then spoke to his friend.

“C’est luin qui a telephone?”

“Oui...”

“Are you Marc Antonio?” Alex asked.

“Yes. You say you are a friend of Edward Pleasure. I didn’t know Edward hung out with kids.”

“I know his daughter. I was staying with him in France when...” Alex hesitated. “You know what happened to him?”

“Of course I know what happened to him. Why do you think I am hiding here?” He gazed at Alex quizzically, his one good eye slowly evaluating him. “You said on the telephone that you could tell me something about Damian Cray. Do you know him?”

“I met him two days ago. In London...”

“Cray is no longer in London.” It was Robert Guppy who spoke, leaning against the door. “He has a software plant just outside Amsterdam. In Sloterdijk. He arrived there this morning.”

“How do you know?”

“We’re keeping a close eye on Mr Cray.”

Alex turned to Marc Antonio. “You have to tell me what you and Edward Pleasure found out about him,” he said. “What story were you working on? What was the secret meeting he had here?” The

photographer thought for a moment, then smiled crookedly, showing nicotine-stained teeth. “Alex Rider,” he muttered, “you’re a strange kid. You say you have information to give me, but you come here and you ask only questions. You have a nerve. But I like that.” He took out a cigarette—a Gauloise—and screwed it into his mouth. He lit it and blew blue smoke into the air. “All right. It is against my better judgement. But I will tell you what I know.”

There were two bar stools next to the kitchen. He perched on one and invited Alex to do the same. Robert Guppy stayed by the door.

“The story that Ed was working on had nothing to do with Damian Cray,” he began. “At least, not to start with. Ed was never interested in the entertainment business. No. He was working on something much more important... a story about the NSA. You know what that is? It’s the National Security Agency of America. It’s an organization involved in counter-terrorism, espionage and the protection of information. Most of its work is top secret. Code makers. Code breakers. Spies...”

“Ed became interested in a man called Charlie Roper, an extremely high-ranking officer in the NSA. He had information—I don’t know how he got it—that this man, Roper, might have turned traitor. He was heavily in debt. An addict...”

“Drugs?” Alex asked.

Marc Antonio shook his head. “Gambling. It can be just as destructive. Ed heard that Roper was here in Paris and believed he had come to sell secrets—either to the Chinese or, more likely, the North Koreans. He met me just over a week ago. We’d worked together often, he and I. He got the stories; I got the pictures. We were a team. More than that—we were friends.” Marc Antonio shrugged. “Anyway, we found out where Roper was staying and we followed him from his hotel.

We had no idea who he was meeting, and if you had told me, I would never have believed it.”

He paused and drew on his Gauloise. The tip glowed red. Smoke trickled up in front of his good eye.

“Roper went for lunch at a restaurant called la Tour d’Argent. It is one of the most expensive restaurants in Paris. And it was Damian Cray who was paying the bill. We saw the two of them together. The restaurant is high up but it has wide glass windows with views of Paris. I took photographs of them with a telescopic lens. Cray gave Roper an envelope. I think it contained money, and, if so, it was a lot of money because the envelope was very thick.”

“Wait a minute,” Alex interrupted. “What would a pop singer want with someone from the NSA?”

“That is exactly what Ed wanted to know,” the photographer replied. “He began to ask questions.

He must have asked too many. Because the next thing I heard, someone had tried to kill him in Saint-Pierre and that same day they came for me. In my case the bomb was in my car. If I had turned the ignition, I wouldn’t be speaking to you now.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I am a careful man. I noticed a wire.” He stubbed out the cigarette. “Someone also broke into my apartment. Much of my equipment was stolen, including my camera and all the photographs I had taken at la Tour d’Argent. It was no coincidence.”

He paused.

“But why am I telling you all this, Alex Rider? Now it is your turn to tell me what you know.”

“I was on holiday in Saint-Pierre—” Alex began.

That was as far as he got.

A car had stopped somewhere outside the building. Alex hadn't heard it approach. He only became aware of it when its engine stopped. Robert Guppy took a step forward, raising a hand.

Marc Antonio's head snapped round. There was a moment's silence—and Alex knew that it was the wrong sort of silence. It was empty. Final.

And then there was an explosion of bullets and the windows shattered, one after another, the glass falling in great slabs to the floor. Robert Guppy was killed instantly, thrown off his feet with a series of red holes stitched across his chest. A light bulb was hit and exploded; chunks of plaster crumbled off the wall. The air rushed in, and with it came the sound of men shouting and footsteps stamping across the courtyard.

Marc Antonio was the first to recover. Sitting by the kitchen, he had been out of the line of fire and hadn't been hit. Alex too was shocked but uninjured.

“This way!” the photographer shouted and propelled Alex across the room even as the door burst open with a crash of splintering wood. Alex just had time to glimpse a man dressed in black with a machine gun cradled in his arms. Then he was pulled behind one of the screens he had noticed earlier. There was another exit here—not a door but a jagged hole in the wall. Marc Antonio had already climbed through. Alex followed.

“Up!” Marc Antonio pushed Alex ahead of him. “It's the only way!”

There was a wooden staircase, seemingly unused, old and covered in plaster dust. Alex started to climb ... three floors, four, with Marc Antonio just behind him. There was a single door on each floor but Marc Antonio urged him on. He could hear the man with the machine gun. He had been joined by someone else. The two killers were following them up.

He arrived at the top. Another door barred his way. He reached out and turned the handle and at that moment there was another burst of gunfire and Marc Antonio grunted and curved away, falling backwards. Alex knew he was dead. Mercifully, the door had opened in front of him. He tumbled through, expecting at any moment to feel the rake of bullets across his shoulders. But the photographer had saved him, falling between Alex and his pursuers. Alex had made it onto the roof of the building. He lashed out with his heel, slamming the door shut behind him.

He found himself in a landscape of skylights and chimney stacks, water tanks and TV aerials.

The roofs ran the full length of the rue Britannia, with low walls and thick pipes dividing the different houses. What had Marc Antonio intended, coming up here? He was six floors above street level. Was there a fire escape? A staircase leading down?

Alex had no time to find out. The door flew open and the two men came through it, moving more slowly now, knowing he was trapped. Somewhere deep inside Alex a voice whispered—why couldn't they leave him alone? They had come for Marc Antonio, not for him. He was nothing to do with this. But he knew they would have their orders. Kill the photographer and anyone associated

with him. It didn't matter who Alex was. He was just part of the package.

And then he remembered something he had seen when he entered the rue Britannia, and suddenly he was running, without even being sure that he was going in the right direction. He heard the clatter of machine-gun fire and black tiles disintegrated centimetres behind his feet.

Another burst. He felt a spray of bullets passing close to him and part of a chimney stack shattered, showering him with dust. He jumped over a low partition. The edge of the roof was getting closer. The men behind him paused, thinking he had nowhere to go. Alex kept running.

He reached the edge and launched himself into the air.

To the men with the guns it must have seemed that he had jumped to a certain death on the pavement six floors below. But Alex had seen building works: scaffolding, cement mixers—and an orange pipe designed to carry builders' debris from the different floors down to the street.

The pipe actually consisted of a series of buckets, each one bottomless, interlocking like a flume at a swimming pool. Alex couldn't judge his leap—but he was lucky. For a second or two he fell, arms and legs sprawling. Then he saw the entrance to the pipe and managed to steer himself towards it. First his outstretched legs, then his hips and shoulders, entered the tube perfectly. The tunnel was filled with cement dust and he was blinded. He could just make out the orange walls flashing past. The back of his head, his thighs and shoulders were battered mercilessly. He couldn't breathe and realized with a sick dread that if the exit was blocked he would break every bone in his body.

The tube was shaped like a stretched-out 3. As Alex reached the bottom, he felt himself slowing down. Suddenly he was spat back out into daylight. There was a mound of sand next to one of the cement mixers and he thudded into it. All the breath was knocked out of him. Sand and cement filled his mouth. But he was alive.

Painfully he got to his feet and looked up. The two men were still on the roof, far above him.

They had decided not to attempt his stunt. The orange tube had been just wide enough to take him; they would have got jammed before they were halfway. Alex looked up the street. There was a car parked outside the entrance to Marc Antonio's studio. But there was nobody in sight.

He spat and dragged the back of his hand across his lips; then he limped quickly away. Marc Antonio was dead, but he had given Alex another piece of the puzzle. And Alex knew where he had to go next. Sloterdijk. A software plant outside Amsterdam. Just a few hours on a train from Paris.

He reached the end of the rue Britannia and turned the corner, moving faster all the time. He was bruised, filthy and lucky to be alive. He just wondered how he was going to explain all this to Jack.

BLOOD MONEY

Alex lay on his stomach, watching the guards as they examined the waiting car. He was holding a pair of Bausch & Lomb prism system binoculars with 30x magnification, and although he was more than a hundred metres away from the main gate, he could see everything clearly ... right down to the car's number plate and the driver's moustache.

He had been here for more than an hour, lying motionless in front of a bank of pine trees, hidden from sight by a row of shrubs. He was wearing grey jeans, a dark T-shirt and a khaki jacket, which he had picked up in the same army supplies shop that had provided the binoculars. The weather had turned yet again, bringing with it an afternoon of constant drizzle, and Alex was soaked through. He wished now that he had brought the thermos of hot chocolate Jack had offered him. At the time, he'd thought she was treating him like a child—but even the SAS know the importance of keeping warm. They had taught him as much when he was training with them.

Jack had come with him to Amsterdam and once again it had been she who had checked them into a hotel, this time on the Herengracht, one of the three main canals. She was there now, waiting in their room. Of course, she had wanted to come with him. After what had happened in Paris, she was more worried about him than ever. But Alex had persuaded her that two people would have twice as much chance of being spotted as one, and her bright red hair would hardly help. Reluctantly she had agreed.

“Just make sure you get back to the hotel before dark,” she said. “And if you pass a tulip shop, maybe you could bring me a bunch.”

He smiled, remembering her words. He shifted his weight, feeling the damp grass beneath his elbows. He wondered what exactly he had learnt in the past hour.

He was in the middle of a strange industrial area on the outskirts of Amsterdam. Sloterdijk contained a sprawl of factories, warehouses and processing plants. Most of the compounds were low-rise, separated from each other by wide stretches of tarmac, but there were also clumps of trees and grassland as if someone had tried—and failed—to cheer the place up. Three windmills rose up behind the headquarters of Cray's technological empire. But they weren't the traditional Dutch models, the sort that would appear on picture postcards. These were modern, towering pillars of grey concrete with triple blades endlessly slicing the air. They were huge and menacing, like invaders from another planet.

The compound itself reminded Alex of an army barracks ... or maybe a prison. It was surrounded by a double fence, the outer one topped with razor wire. There were guard towers at fifty-metre intervals and guards on patrol all around the perimeter. In Holland, a country where the police carry guns, Alex wasn't surprised that the guards were armed. Inside, he could make out eight or nine buildings, low and rectangular, white-bricked with high-tech plastic roofs.

Various people were moving around, some of them transported in electric cars. Alex could hear the whine of the engines, like milk floats. The compound had its own communications centre, with five huge satellite dishes mounted outside. Otherwise, it seemed to consist of laboratories, offices and living quarters. One building stood out in the middle of it all: a glass and steel cube, aggressively modern in design. This might be the main headquarters, Alex thought. Perhaps he would find Damian Cray inside.

But how was he to get in? He had been studying the entrance for the last hour.

A single road led up to the gate, with a traffic light at each end. It was a complicated process.

When a car or a truck arrived, it stopped at the bottom of the road and waited. Only when the first traffic light changed was it allowed to continue forward to the glass and brick guardhouse next to the gate. At this point, a uniformed man appeared and took the driver's ID, presumably to check it on a computer. Two more men examined the vehicle, checking that there were no passengers. And that wasn't all. There was a security camera mounted high up on the fence and Alex had noticed a length of what looked like toughened glass built into the road. When the vehicles stopped they were right on top of it, and Alex guessed that there must be a second camera underneath. There was no way he could sneak into the compound. Cray Software Technology had left nothing to chance.

Several trucks had entered the compound while he had been watching. Alex had recognized the black-clothed figure of Omni painted—life-sized—on the sides as part of the Gameslayer logo.

He wondered if it might be possible to sneak inside one of the trucks, perhaps as it was waiting at the first set of lights. But the road was too open. At night it would be floodlit. Anyway, the doors would almost certainly be locked.

He couldn't climb the fences. The razor wire would see to that. He doubted he could tunnel his way in. Could he somehow disguise himself and mingle with the evening shift? No. For once his size and age were against him. Maybe Jack would have been able to attempt it, pretending to be a replacement cleaner or a technician. But there was no way he would be able to talk his way past the guards, particularly without speaking a word of Dutch. Security was too tight.

And then Alex saw it. Right in front of his eyes.

Another truck had stopped and the driver was being questioned while the cabin was searched.

Could he do it? He remembered the bicycle that was chained to a lamppost just a couple of hundred metres down the road. Before he had left England he had gone through the manual that had come with it and had been amazed how many gadgets Smithers had been able to conceal in and around such an ordinary object. Even the bicycle clips were magnetic! Alex watched the gate slide open and the truck pass through.

Yes. It would work. He would have to wait until it was dark—but it was the last thing anyone would expect. Despite everything, Alex suddenly found himself smiling.

He just hoped he could find a fancy-dress shop in Amsterdam.

By nine o'clock it was dark but the searchlights around the compound had been activated long before, turning the area into a dazzling collision of black and white. The gates, the razor wire, the guards with their guns ... all could be seen a mile away. But now they were throwing vivid shadows, pools of

darkness that might offer a hiding place to anyone brave enough to get close.

A single truck was approaching the main gate. The driver was Dutch and had driven up from the port of Rotterdam. He had no idea what he was carrying and he didn't care. From the first day he had started working for Cray Software Technology, he had known that it was better not to ask questions. The first of the two traffic lights was red and he slowed down, then came to a halt.

There were no other vehicles in sight and he was annoyed to be kept waiting, but it was better not to complain. There was a sudden knocking sound and he glanced out of the window, looking in the side mirror. Was someone trying to get his attention? But there was no one there and a moment later the light changed, so he threw the gearstick into first and moved on again.

As usual he drove onto the glass panel and wound down his window. There was a guard standing outside and he passed across his ID, a plastic card with his photograph, name and employee number. The driver knew that other guards would inspect his truck. He sometimes wondered why they were so sensitive about security. After all, they were only making computer games. But he had heard about industrial sabotage ... companies stealing secrets from each other. He supposed it made sense.

Two guards were walking round the truck even as the driver sat there, thinking his private thoughts. A third was examining the pictures being transmitted by the camera underneath it. The truck had recently been cleaned. The word GAMESLAYER stood out on the side, with the Omni figure crouching next to it. One of the guards reached out and tried to open the door at the back.

It was, as it should have been, locked. Meanwhile the other guard peered in through the front cabin window. But it was obvious that the driver was alone.

The security operation was smooth and well practised. The cameras had shown nobody hiding underneath the truck or on the roof. The rear door was locked. The driver had been cleared. One of the guards gave a signal and the gate opened electronically, sliding sideways to let the truck in. The driver knew where to go without being told. After about fifty metres he branched off the entrance road and followed a narrower track that brought him to the unloading bay. There were about a dozen other vehicles parked here, with warehouses on both sides. The driver turned off the engine, got out and locked the door. He had paperwork to deal with. He would hand over the keys and receive a stamped docket with his time of arrival. They would unload the vehicle the following day.

The driver left. Nothing moved. There was nobody else in the area.

But if anyone had walked past, they might have seen a remarkable thing. On the side of the truck, the black-clothed figure of Omni turned its head. At least, that was what it would have looked like. But if that person had looked more closely, they would have realized that there were two figures on the truck. One was painted; the other was a real person, clinging impossibly to the metal panelling in exactly the same position as the picture underneath.

Alex Rider dropped silently to the ground. The muscles in his arms and legs were screaming and he wondered how much longer he would have been able to hold on. Smithers had supplied four powerful magnetic clips with the bike and these were what Alex had used to keep himself in place: two for his hands, two for his feet. He quickly pulled off the black ninja suit he had bought that afternoon in Amsterdam, rolled it up and stuffed it into a bin. He had been in plain sight of the guards as the truck

drove through the gate. But the guards hadn't looked too closely. They had expected to see a figure next to the Gameslayer logo and that was just what they had seen.

For once they had been wrong to believe their eyes.

Alex took stock of his surroundings. He might be inside the compound, but his luck wouldn't last for ever. He didn't doubt that there would be other guards on patrol, and other cameras too. What exactly was he looking for? The strange thing was, he had no real idea. But something told him that if Damian Cray went in for all this security, then it must be because he had something to hide. Of course, it was still possible that Alex was wrong, that Cray was innocent. It was a comforting thought.

He made his way through the compound, heading for the great cube that stood at its heart. He heard a whining sound and ducked into the shadows next to a wall as an electronic car sped past with three passengers and a woman in blue overalls at the wheel. He became aware of activity somewhere ahead of him. An open area, brilliantly lit, stretched out behind one of the warehouses. A voice suddenly echoed in the air, amplified by a speaker system. It was a man speaking—but in Dutch. Alex couldn't understand a word. Moving more quickly, he hurried on, determined to see what was happening.

He found a narrow alleyway between two of the buildings and ran the full length, grateful for the shadows of the walls. At the end he came to a fire escape, a metal staircase spiralling upwards, and threw himself breathlessly behind it. He could hide here. But, looking between the steps, he had a clear view of what was happening ahead.

There was a square of black tarmac with glass and steel office blocks on all sides. The largest of these was the cube that Alex had seen from outside. Damian Cray was standing in front of it, talking animatedly to a man in a white coat, with three more men just behind him. Even from a distance Cray was unmistakable. He was the smallest person there, dressed in yet another designer suit. He had come out to watch some sort of demonstration. About half a dozen guards stood waiting, dotted around the square. Harsh white lights were being beamed down from two metal towers that Alex hadn't noticed before.

Watching through the fire escape, Alex saw that there was a cargo plane in the middle of the square. It took him a moment or two to accept what he was seeing. There was no way the plane could have landed there. The square was only just wide enough to contain it, and there wasn't a runway inside the compound, as far as he knew. It must have been carried here on a truck, possibly assembled on site. But what was it doing here? The plane was an old-fashioned one. It had propellers rather than jets, and wings high up, almost sitting on top of the main body. The words MILLENNIUM AIR were painted in red along the fuselage and on the tail.

Cray looked at his watch. A minute later the loudspeaker crackled again with another announcement in Dutch. Everyone stopped talking and gazed at the plane. Alex stared. A fire had started inside the main cabin. He could see the flames flickering behind the windows. Grey smoke began to seep out of the fuselage and suddenly one of the propellers caught alight. The fire seemed to spread out of control in seconds, consuming the engine and then spreading across the wing. Alex waited for someone to do something. If there was any fuel in the plane, it would surely explode at any moment. But nobody moved. Cray seemed to nod.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. The man in the white coat spoke into a radio transmitter and

the fire went out. It was extinguished so quickly that if Alex hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn't have believed it had been there in the first place. They didn't use water or foam. There were no scorch marks and no smoke.

One moment the plane had been burning; the next it wasn't. It was as simple as that.

Cray and the three men with him spent a few seconds talking, before turning and strolling back into the cube. The guards in the square marched off. The plane was left where it was. Alex wondered what on earth he had got himself into. This had nothing to do with computer games. It made absolutely no sense at all.

But at least he had spotted Damian Cray.

Alex waited until the guards had gone, then twisted out from behind the fire escape. He made his way as quickly as he could around the square, keeping in the shadows. Cray had made a mistake.

Breaking into the compound was virtually impossible, so he had worried less about security on the inside. Alex hadn't spotted any cameras, and the guards in the towers were looking out rather than in. For the moment he was safe.

He followed Cray into the building and found himself crossing the white marble floor of what was nothing more than a huge glass box. Above him he could see the night sky with the three windmills looming in the distance. The building contained nothing. But there was a single round hole in one corner of the floor and a staircase leading down.

Alex heard voices.

He crept down the stairs, which led directly into a large underground room. Crouching on the bottom step, concealed behind wide steel banisters, he watched.

The room was open-plan, with a white marble floor and corridors leading off in several directions. The architecture made him think of a vault in an ultra-modern bank. But the gorgeous rugs, the fireplace, the Italian furniture and the dazzling white Bechstein grand piano could have come out of a palace. To one side was a curving desk with a bank of telephones and computer screens. All the lighting was at floor level, giving the room a bizarre, unsettling atmosphere, with all the shadows going the wrong way. A portrait of Damian Cray holding a white poodle covered an entire wall.

The man himself was sitting on a sofa, sipping a bright yellow drink. He had a cherry on a cocktail stick and Alex watched him pick it off with his perfect white teeth and slowly eat it. The three men from the square were with him, and Alex knew at once that he had been right all along—that Cray was indeed at the centre of the web.

One of the men was Yassen Gregorovich. Wearing jeans and a polo neck, he was sitting on the piano stool, his legs crossed. The second man stood near him, leaning against the piano. He was older, with silver hair and a sagging, pockmarked face. He was wearing a blue blazer with a striped tie that made him look like a minor official in a bank or a cricket club. He had large spectacles that had sunk into his face as if it were damp clay. He looked nervous, the eyes behind the glass circles blinking frequently. The third man was darkly handsome, in his late forties, with black hair, grey eyes and a jawline that was square and serious. He was casually dressed in a leather jacket and an open-necked shirt and seemed to be enjoying himself.

Cray was talking to him. “I’m very grateful to you, Mr Roper. Thanks to you, Eagle Strike can now proceed on schedule.”

Roper! This was the man Cray had met in Paris. Alex had a sense that everything had come full circle. He strained to hear what the two men were saying.

“Hey—please. Call me Charlie.” The man spoke with an American accent. “And there’s no need to thank me, Damian. I’ve enjoyed doing business with you.”

“I do have a few questions,” Cray murmured, and Alex saw him pick up an object from a coffee table next to the sofa. It was a metallic capsule, about the same shape and size as a mobile phone.

“As I understand it, the gold codes change daily. Presumably the flash drive is currently programmed with today’s codes. But if Eagle Strike were to take place two days from now...”

“Just plug it in. The flash drive will update itself,” Roper explained. He had an easy, lazy smile.

“That’s the beauty of it. First it will burrow through the security systems. Then it will pick up the new codes ... like taking candy from a baby. The moment you have the codes, you transmit them back through Milstar and you’re set. The only problem you have, like I told you, is the little matter of the finger on the button.”

“Well, we’ve already solved that,” Cray said.

“Then I might as well move out of here.”

“Just give me a couple more minutes of your valuable time, Mr Roper ... Charlie...” Cray said.

He sipped his cocktail, licked his lips and set the glass down. “How can I be sure that the flash drive will actually work?”

“You have my word on it,” Roper said. “And you’re certainly paying me enough.”

“Indeed so. Half a million dollars in advance. And two million dollars now. However...” Cray paused and pursed his lips. “I still have one small worry on my mind.”

Alex’s leg had gone to sleep as he crouched, watching the scene from the stairs. Slowly he straightened it out. He wished he understood more of what they were saying. He knew that a flash drive was a type of storage device used in computer technology. But who or what was Milstar? And what was Eagle Strike?

“What’s the problem?” Roper asked casually.

“I’m afraid you are, Mr Roper.” The green eyes in Cray’s round, babyish face were suddenly hard. “You are not as reliable as I had hoped. When you came to Paris, you were followed.”

“That’s not true.”

“An English journalist found out about your gambling habit. He and a photographer followed you to la Tour d’Argent.” Cray held up a hand to stop Roper interrupting. “I have dealt with them both. But you have disappointed me, Mr Roper. I wonder if I can still trust you.”

“Now you listen to me, Damian.” Roper spoke angrily. “We had a deal. I worked here with your

technical boys. I gave them the information they needed to load the flash drive, and that's my part of it over. How you're going to get to the VIP lounge and how you'll actually activate the system ... that's your business. But you owe me two million dollars, and this journalist— whoever he was—doesn't make any difference at all.”

“Blood money,” Cray said.

“What?”

“That's what they call money paid to traitors.”

“I'm no traitor!” Roper growled. “I needed the money, that's all. I haven't betrayed my country.

So quit talking like this, pay me what you owe me and let me walk out of here.”

“Of course I'm going to pay you what I owe you.” Cray smiled. “You'll have to forgive me, Charlie. I was just thinking aloud.” He gestured, his hand falling limply back. The American glanced round and Alex saw that there was an alcove to one side of the room. It was shaped like a giant bottle, with a curved wall behind and a curving glass door in front. Inside was a table, and on the table a leather attaché case. “Your money is in there,” Cray said. “Thank you.”

Neither Yassen Gregorovich nor the man with the spectacles had spoken throughout all this, but they watched intently as the American approached the alcove. There must have been some sort of sensor built into the door because it slid open automatically. Roper went up to the table and opened the case. Alex heard the two locks click up.

Then Roper turned round. “I hope this isn't your idea of a joke,” he said. “This is empty.”

Cray smiled at him from the sofa. “Don't worry,” he said. “I'll fill it.” He reached out and pressed a button on the coffee table in front of him. There was a hiss and the door of the alcove slid shut.

“Hey!” Roper shouted.

Cray pressed the button a second time.

For an instant nothing happened. Alex realized he was no longer breathing. His heart was beating at twice its normal rate. Then something bright and silver dropped down from somewhere high up inside the closed-off room, landing inside the case. Roper reached in and held up a small coin.

It was a quarter—a twenty-five cent piece.

“Cray! What are you playing at?” he demanded.

More coins began to fall into the case. Alex couldn't see exactly what was happening but he guessed that the room really was like a bottle, totally sealed apart from a hole somewhere above.

The coins were falling through the hole, the trickle rapidly turning into a cascade. In seconds the attaché case was full, and still the coins came, tumbling onto the pile, spreading out over the table and onto the floor.

Perhaps Charlie Roper had an inkling of what was about to happen. He forced his way through the shower of coins and pounded on the glass door. “Stop this!” he shouted. “Let me out of here!”

“But I haven't paid you all your money, Mr. Roper,” Cray replied. “I thought you said I owed you two

million dollars.”

Suddenly the cascade became a torrent. Thousands and thousands of coins poured into the room.

Roper cried out, bending an arm over his head, trying to protect himself. Alex quickly worked out the mathematics. Two million dollars, twenty-five cents at a time. The payment was being made in just about the smallest of small change. How many coins would there be? Already they filled all the available floor space, rising up to the American’s knees. The torrent intensified.

Now the rush of coins was solid and Roper’s screams were almost drowned out by the clatter of metal against metal. Alex wanted to look away but he found himself fixated, his eyes wide with horror.

He could barely see the man any more. The coins thundered down. Roper was trying to swat them away, as if they were a swarm of bees. His arms and hands were vaguely visible but his face and body had disappeared. He lashed out with a fist and Alex saw a smear of blood appear on the door—but the toughened glass wouldn’t break. The coins oozed forward, filling every inch of space. They rose up higher and higher. Roper was invisible now, sealed into the glittering mass.

If he was still screaming, nothing more could be heard.

And then, suddenly, it was over. The last coins fell. A grave of eight million quarters. Alex shuddered, trying to imagine what it must have been like to have been trapped inside. How had the American died? Had he been suffocated by the falling coins or crushed by their weight? Alex had no doubt that the man inside was dead. Blood money! Cray’s sick joke couldn’t have been more true.

Cray laughed.

“That was fun!” he said.

“Why did you kill him?” The man in the spectacles had spoken for the first time. He had a Dutch accent. His voice was trembling.

“Because he was careless, Henryk,” Cray replied. “We can’t make mistakes, not at this late stage. And it’s not as if I broke any promises. I said I’d pay him two million dollars, and if you want to open the door and count it, two million dollars is exactly what you’ll find.”

“Don’t open the door!” the man called Henryk gasped.

“No. I think it would be a bit messy.” Cray smiled. “Well, we’ve taken care of Roper. We’ve got the flash drive. We’re all set to go. So why don’t we have another drink?”

Still crouching at the bottom of the stairs, Alex gritted his teeth, forcing himself not to panic.

Every instinct told him to get up and run, but he knew he had to take care. What he had seen was almost beyond belief—but at least his mission was now clear. He had to get out of the compound, out of Sloterdijk, and back to England. Like it or not, he had to go back to MI6.

He knew now that he had been right all along and that Damian Cray was both mad and evil. All his posturing—his many charities and his speeches against violence—was precisely that; a façade. He was planning something that he called Eagle Strike, and whatever it was would take place in two days’ time. It involved a security system and a VIP lounge. Was he going to break into an embassy? It

didn't matter. Somehow he would make Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones believe him. There was a dead man called Charlie Roper. A connection with the National Security Agency of America. Surely Alex had enough information to persuade them to make an arrest.

But first he had to get out.

He turned just in time to see the figure looming above him. It was a guard, coming down the stairs. Alex started to react, but he was too late.

The guard had seen him. He was carrying a gun. Slowly Alex raised his hands. The guard gestured and Alex stood up, rising above the stair rail. On the other side of the room, Damian Cray saw him. His face lit up with delight.

“Alex Rider!” he exclaimed. “I was hoping to see you again. What a lovely surprise! Come on over and have a drink—and let me tell you how you're going to die.”

PAIN SYNTHESIS

Yassen has told me all about you,” Cray said.

“Apparently you worked for MI6. I have to say, that’s a very novel idea. Are you still working for them now? Did they send you after me?”

Alex said nothing.

“If you don’t answer my questions, I may have to start thinking about doing nasty things to you. Or getting Yassen to do them. That’s what I pay him for. Pins and needles ... that sort of thing.”

“MI6 don’t know anything,” Yassen said.

He and Cray were alone in the room with Alex. The guard and the man called Henryk had gone.

Alex was sitting on the sofa with a glass of chocolate milk that Cray had insisted on pouring for him. Cray was now perched on the piano stool. His legs were crossed and he seemed completely relaxed as he sipped another cocktail.

“There’s no way the intelligence services could know anything about us,” Yassen went on. “And if they did, they wouldn’t have sent Alex.”

“Then why was he at the Pleasure Dome? Why is he here?” Cray turned to Alex. “I don’t suppose you’ve come all this way to get my autograph. As a matter of fact, Alex, I’m rather pleased to see you. I was planning to come and find you one day anyway. You completely spoilt the launch of my Gameslayer. Much too clever by half! I was very cross with you, and although I’m rather busy at the moment, I was going to arrange a little accident...”

“Like you did for that woman in Hyde Park?” Alex asked.

“She was a nuisance. She asked impertinent questions. I hate journalists, and I hate smart-arse kids too. As I say, I’m very glad you managed to find your way here. It makes my life a lot easier.”

“You can’t do anything to me,” Alex said. “MI6 know I’m here. They know all about Eagle Strike. You may have the codes, but you’ll never be able to use them. And if I don’t report in this evening, this whole place will be surrounded before tomorrow and you’ll be in jail...”

Cray glanced at Yassen. The Russian shook his head. “He’s lying. He must have heard us talking from the stairs. He knows nothing.”

Cray licked his lips. Alex realized that he was enjoying himself. He could see now just how crazy Cray was. The man didn’t connect with the real world and Alex knew that whatever he was planning, it was going to be on a big scale—and probably lethal.

“It doesn’t make any difference,” Cray said. “Eagle Strike will have taken place in less than forty-

eight hours from now. I agree with you, Yassen. This boy knows nothing. He's irrelevant. I can kill him and it won't make any difference at all."

"You don't have to kill him," Yassen said. Alex was surprised. The Russian had killed Ian Rider.

He was Alex's worst enemy. But this was the second time Yassen had tried to protect him. "You can just lock him up until it's all over."

"You're right," Cray said. "I don't have to kill him. But I want to. It's something I want to do very much." He pushed himself off the piano stool and came over to Alex. "Do you remember I told you about pain synthesis?" he said. "In London. The demonstration... Pain synthesis allows game players to experience the hero's emotions—all his emotions, particularly those associated with pain and death. You may wonder how I programmed it into the software. The answer, my dear Alex, is by the use of volunteers such as yourself."

"I didn't volunteer," Alex muttered.

"Nor did the others. But they still helped me. Just as you will help me. And your reward will be an end to the pain. The comfort and the quiet of death..." Cray looked away. "You can take him," he said.

Two guards had come into the room. Alex hadn't heard them approach, but now they stepped out of the shadows and grabbed hold of him. He tried to fight back, but they were too strong for him.

They pulled him off the sofa and away, down one of the passages leading from the room.

Alex managed to look back one last time. Cray had already forgotten him. He was holding the flash drive, admiring it. But Yassen was watching him and he looked worried. Then an automatic door shot down with a hiss of compressed air and Alex was dragged away, his feet sliding uselessly behind him, following the passageway to whatever it was that Damian Cray had arranged.

The cell was at the end of another underground corridor. The two guards threw Alex in, then waited as he turned round to face them. The one who had found him on the stairs spoke a few words with a heavy Dutch accent.

"The door closes and it stays closed. You find the way out. Or you starve."

That was it. The door slammed and Alex heard two bolts being drawn across. He heard the guards' footsteps fade into the distance. Suddenly everything was silent. He was on his own. He looked around him. The cell was a bare metal box about five metres long and two metres wide with a single bunk, no water and no window. The door had closed flush to the wall. There was no crack round the side, not so much as a keyhole. He knew he had never been in worse trouble.

Cray hadn't believed his story; he had barely even considered it. Whether Alex was with MI6 or not seemed to make no difference to him ... and the truth was that this time Alex really had got himself caught up in something without MI6 there to back him up. For once he had no gadgets to help him break out of the cell. He had brought the bicycle that Smithers had given him from London to Paris and then to Amsterdam. But right now it was parked outside Central Station in the city and would stay there until it was stolen or rusted away. Jack knew he had planned to break into the compound, but even if she did raise the alarm, how would anyone ever find him?

Despair weighed down on him. He no longer had the strength to fight it.

And still he knew almost nothing. Why had Cray invested so much time and money in the game system he called Gameslayer? Why did he need the flash drive? What was the plane doing in the middle of the compound? Above all, what was Cray planning? Eagle Strike would take place in two days—but where, and what would it entail?

Alex forced himself to take control. He'd been locked up before. The important thing was to fight back—not to admit defeat. Cray had already made mistakes. Even speaking his own name on the phone when Alex called him from Saint-Pierre had been an error of judgement. He might have power, fame and enormous resources. He was certainly planning a huge operation. But he wasn't as clever as he thought. Alex could still beat him.

But how to begin? Cray had put him into this cell to experience what he called pain synthesis.

Alex didn't like the sound of that. And what had the guard said? Find the way out—or starve.

But there was no way out. Alex ran his hands across the walls. They were solid steel. He went over and examined the door a second time. Nothing.

It was tightly sealed. He glanced at the ceiling, at the single bulb burning behind a thick pane of glass. That only left the bunk...

He found the trapdoor underneath, built into the wall. It was like a cat flap, just big enough to take a human body. Gingerly, wondering if it might be booby-trapped, Alex reached out and pushed it. The metal flap swung inwards. There was some sort of tunnel on the other side, but he couldn't see anything. If he crawled into it, he would be entering a narrow space with no light at all—and he couldn't even be sure that the tunnel actually went anywhere. Did he have the courage to go in?

There was no alternative. Alex examined the cell one last time, knelt down and pushed himself forward. The metal flap swung open in front of him, then travelled down his back as he crawled into the tunnel. He felt it hit the back of his heels and there was a soft click. What was that? He couldn't see anything. He lifted a hand and waved it in front of his face. It was as if it wasn't there. He reached out in front of him and felt a solid wall. God! He had walked—crawled rather—into a trap. This wasn't the way out after all.

He pushed himself back the way he had come, and that was when he discovered the flap was now locked. He kicked out with his feet but it wouldn't move. Panic, total and uncontrollable, overwhelmed him. He was buried alive, in total darkness, with no air. This was what Cray had meant by pain synthesis: a death too hideous to imagine.

Alex went mad.

Unable to control himself, he screamed out, his fists lashing against the walls of this metal coffin. He was suffocating.

His flailing hand hit a section of the wall and he felt it give way. There was a second flap!

Gasping for air, he twisted round and into a second tunnel, as black and as chilling as the first.

But at least there was some faint flicker of hope burning in his consciousness. There was a way through. If he could just keep a grip on himself, he might yet find his way back into the light.

The second tunnel was longer. Alex slithered forward, feeling the sheet metal under his hands.

He forced himself to slow down. He was still completely blind. If there was a hole ahead of him, he would plunge into it before he knew what had happened. As he went, he tapped against the walls, searching for other passageways. His head knocked into something and he swore. The bad language helped him. It was good to direct his hatred against Damian Cray. And hearing his own voice reminded him he was still alive.

He had bumped into a ladder. He took hold of it with both hands and felt for the opening that must be above his shoulders. He was lying flat on his stomach, but slowly he manipulated himself round and began to climb up, feeling his way in case there was a ceiling overhead. His hand came into contact with something and he pushed. To his huge relief, light flooded in. He had opened some sort of trapdoor with a large, brightly lit room on the other side. Gratefully he climbed the last rungs and passed through.

The air was warm. Alex sucked it into his lungs, allowing his feelings of panic and claustrophobia to fade away. Then he looked up.

He was kneeling on a straw-covered floor in a room that was bathed in yellow light. Three of the walls seemed to have been built with huge blocks of stone. Blazing torches slanted in towards him, fixed to metal brackets. Gates at least ten metres high stood in front of him. They were made out of wood, with iron fastenings and a huge face carved into the surface. Some sort of Mexican god with saucer eyes and solid, blocklike teeth. Alex had seen the face before but it took him a few moments to work out where. And then he knew exactly what lay ahead of him.

He knew how Cray had programmed pain synthesis into his game.

The gates had appeared at the start of Feathered Serpent, the game that Alex had played in the Pleasure Dome in Hyde Park. Then it had been a computerized image, projected onto a screen—and Alex had been represented by an avatar, a two-dimensional version of himself. But Cray had also built an actual physical version of the game. Alex reached out and touched one of the walls.

Sure enough, they weren't really stone but some sort of toughened plastic. The whole thing was like one of those walk-throughs at Disneyland ...an ancient world reproduced with high-tech modern construction. There had been a time when Alex wouldn't have believed it possible, but he knew with a sick certainty that once the gates opened, he would find himself in a perfect reconstruction of the game—and that meant he would be facing the same challenges. Only this time it would be for real: real flames, real acid, real spears and—if he made a mistake—real death.

Cray had told him that he had used other “volunteers”. Presumably they had been filmed fighting their way through the various challenges; and all the time their emotions had been recorded and then somehow digitally transferred and programmed into the Gameslayer system. It was sick.

Alex realized that the darkness of the underground passages hadn't even been part of the real challenge. That began now.

He didn't move. He needed time to think, to remember as much as he could about the game he had played at the Pleasure Dome. There had been five zones. First some sort of temple, with a crossbow and a sword concealed in the walls. Would Cray provide him with weapons in this reconstruction? He would have to wait and see. What came after the temple? There had been a pit with a flying

creature: half butterfly, half dragon. After that Alex had run down a corridor—

spears shooting out of the walls—and into a jungle, the home of the metallic snakes. Then there had been a mirror maze guarded by Aztec gods and finally a pool of fire, his exit to the next level.

A pool of fire. If that was reproduced here, it would kill him. Alex remembered what Cray had said. The comfort and the quiet of death. There was no way out of this madhouse. If he did manage to survive the five zones, he would be allowed to finish it by throwing himself into the flames.

Alex felt hatred well up inside him. He could actually taste it. Damian Cray was beyond evil.

What could he do? There would be no way back through the tunnels and Alex wasn't sure he had the nerve even to try. He had only one choice, and that was to continue. He had almost beaten the game once. That at least gave him a little hope. On the other hand, there was a world of difference between manipulating a controller and actually attempting the action himself. He couldn't move or react with the speed of an electronic figure. Nor would he be given extra lives.

If he was killed once, he would stay dead.

He stood up. At once the gates swung silently open, and there ahead of him was the temple that he had last seen in the game. He wondered if his progress was being monitored. Could he at least rely on an element of surprise?

He walked through the gates. The temple was exactly how he remembered it from the screen at the Pleasure Dome: a vast space with stone walls covered in strange carvings and pillars, statues crouching at their base, stretching far above him. Even the stained-glass windows had been reproduced with images of UFOs hovering over fields of golden corn. And there too were the cameras, swivelling to follow him and, presumably, to record whatever progress he made. Organ music, modern rather than religious, throbbed all around him. Alex shivered, barely able to accept that this was really happening.

He walked further into the temple, every sense alert, waiting for an attack that he knew could come from any direction. He wished now that he had played Feathered Serpent more carefully.

He had raced through the zones at such speed that he had probably missed half of the ambushes.

His feet rang out on the silver floor. Ahead of him, rusting staircases that reminded him of a submarine or a submerged ship twisted upwards. He thought of trying one of them. But he hadn't gone that way when he was playing the game and preferred not to now. It was better to stick with what he knew.

The alcove that contained the crossbow was underneath a wooden pulpit, carved in the shape of a dragon. It was almost completely covered by what looked like green ivy—but Alex knew that the twisting vines carried an electrical charge. He could see the weapon resting against the stonework, and there was just enough of a gap. Was it worth the risk? Alex tensed himself, preparing to reach in, then threw himself full length on the floor. Half a second later and it would have been fatal. He had remembered the razor boomerang at the same instant that he had heard a whistling sound coming from nowhere. He had no time to prepare himself. He hit the ground so hard that the breath was driven out of him. There was a flash and a series of sparks. He felt a burning pain across his shoulders and knew

that he hadn't been quite fast enough. The boomerang had sliced open his T-shirt, also cutting his skin. It had been a close thing. Any closer and he wouldn't even have made it into the second zone.

And silently the cameras watched. Everything was being recorded. One day it would be fed into Cray's software—presumably Feathered Serpent 2.

Alex sat up and tried to pull his torn shirt together. At least the boomerang had helped in one way. It had hit the ivy, cutting and short-circuiting the electric wires. Alex stretched an arm into the alcove and took out the crossbow. It was antique—wood and iron—but it seemed to be working. Even so, Cray had cheated him. There was an arrow in it, but it had no point. It was too blunt to damage anything.

He decided to take both the crossbow and the arrow with him anyway. He moved away from the alcove and over to the wall where he knew he would find the sword. It was about twenty metres above him but there were loose stones and handholds indicating a way up. Alex was about to start climbing but then he had second thoughts. He had already had one close escape. The wall would almost certainly be booby-trapped. He would be halfway up and a stone would come loose. If he fell, he would break a leg. Cray would enjoy that, watching him lie helpless on the silver floor until some other missile was fired into him to finish him off. And anyway, the sword would probably have no blade.

But thinking about it, Alex suddenly realized that he had the answer. He knew how to beat the simulated world that Cray had built.

Every computer game is a series of programmed events, with nothing random, nothing left to chance. When Alex had played the game in the Pleasure Dome, he had collected the crossbow and then used it to shoot the creature that had attacked him. In the same way, locked doors would have keys; poisons would have antidotes. No matter how much choice you might seem to have, you were always obeying a hidden set of rules.

But Alex had not been programmed. He was a human being and he could do what he wanted. It had cost him a torn shirt and a very narrow escape—but he had learnt his lesson. If he hadn't tried to get the crossbow, he wouldn't have made himself a target for the boomerang. Climbing up the wall to get the sword would put him in danger because he would be doing exactly what was expected.

To get out of the world that Cray had built for him, he had to do everything that wasn't expected.

In other words he had to cheat.

And he would start right now.

He went over to one of the blazing torches and tried to remove it from the wall. He wasn't surprised to find that the whole thing was bolted into place. Cray had thought of everything. But even if he controlled the holders, he couldn't control the flames themselves. Alex pulled off his shirt and wrapped it round the end of the wooden arrow. Then he set it on fire. He smiled to himself. Now he had a weapon that hadn't been programmed.

The exit door was at the far end of the temple. Alex was supposed to take a direct path to it.

Instead, he went the long way round, staying close to the walls, avoiding any traps that might be lying in wait. Ahead of him he could see the second chamber—the rain-drenched pit with its pillars rising from the depths below and ending at floor level. He passed through the door and stopped on a narrow

ledge; the tops of the pillars—barely bigger than soup plates—offered him a path of stepping stones across the void. Alex remembered the flying creature that had attacked him. He looked up. Yes, there it was, almost lost in the gloom: a nylon wire running from the opposite side to the door above his head. He thrust upwards with the burning arrow, holding the flame against the wire.

It worked. The wire caught fire and then snapped. Cray had built a robotic version of the creature that had attacked him in the game. Alex knew that it would have swooped down when he was halfway across, rushing into him and knocking him off his perch, causing him to plunge into whatever lay below. Now he watched with quiet satisfaction as the creature tumbled down from the ceiling and dangled in front of him, a jumble of metal and feathers that was more like a dead parrot than a mythical monster.

The way ahead was clear but the rain was still falling, splashing down from some hidden sprinkler system. The stepping stones would be slippery. Alex knew that his avatar would have been unable to remove its shoes for better grip. He quickly slipped off his trainers, tied them together and hung them round his neck. His socks went into his pocket. Then he jumped. The trick, he knew, was to do this quickly: not to stop, not to look down. He took a breath, then started. The rain blinded him. The tops of the pillars were only just big enough to contain his bare feet. On the very last one he lost his balance. But he didn't have to use his feet—he could move in a way that his avatar couldn't. He threw himself forward, stretching out his hands and allowing his own momentum to carry him towards safety. His chest hit the ground and he clung on, dragging his legs over the edge of the pit. He had made it to the other side.

A corridor ran off to the left, the walls close together and decorated with hideous Aztec faces.

Alex remembered how his avatar had run through here, dodging between a hail of wooden spears. He glanced down and saw that there was what looked like a smoking stream in the floor.

Acid! What now?

He needed another weapon and he had an idea how to get one. He took out his socks, rolled them into a ball and threw them down the corridor. As he had hoped, the movement was enough to activate the sensors that controlled the hidden guns. Short wooden spears spat out of the lips of the Aztec gods at fantastic speed, striking the opposite walls. One of the spears broke in half.

Alex picked it up and felt the needle-sharp point. It was exactly what he wanted. He tucked it into the belt of his trousers. He still had the crossbow; now he had a bolt that might fit it too.

The computer game had been programmed so that there was only one way forward. Alex had been able to dodge both the spears and the acid river easily enough when he was playing Feathered Serpent. But he knew he would be unable to do the same in this grotesque three-dimensional version. He would only have to take one false step and he would be finished. He could imagine splashing into the acid and then panicking. He would be driven straight into the path of the spears as he tried to reach the next zone. No. There had to be another way.

Alex forced himself to concentrate. Ignore the rules! He turned the three words over and over in his mind. Moving along the corridor wasn't an option. But how about up? He put on his shoes, then took a tentative step. The spears nearest the entrance had already been fired. He was safe so long as he didn't move too far down the corridor. He grabbed hold of the wall and, balancing the crossbow over

his shoulder, began to climb. The Aztec heads made perfect footholds, and only when he was at the very top did he begin to make his way along, high above the floor and away from danger. One step at a time, he edged forward. He came to a camera mounted in the ceiling and, with a smile, wrenched out the wire. There was a lot of it and he decided to keep that too.

He reached the end of the corridor and climbed down into the fourth zone, the jungle. He was surprised to discover that the vegetation pressing in on him from all sides was real. He had expected plastic and paper. He could feel the heat in the air and the ground underfoot was soft and wet. What traps were waiting for him here? He remembered the robotic snakes that had barely managed to get close when he played the game, and searched warily for the tracks that would propel something similar his way.

There were no tracks. Alex took another step forward and stopped, paralysed by the horror of what he saw.

There was a snake, and, like the leaves and the creepers, it was real. It was as thick as a man's waist and at least five metres long, lying motionless in a patch of long grass. Its eyes were two black diamonds. For a brief second, Alex hoped it might be dead. But then its tongue flickered out and the whole body heaved, and he knew that he was facing a living thing—one that was beyond nightmares.

The snake had been encased in a fantastic body suit. Alex had no idea how long it could have survived wrapped up like this. As terrifying as the creature was, he still felt a spark of pity for it, seeing what had been done. The suit was made out of wire that had been twisted round and round the full length of the animal, with vicious spikes and razors welded on from the neck all the way to the tail. Looking past the tail, Alex could see dozens of lines cut into the soft ground.

Whatever the snake touched, it sliced. It couldn't help itself. And it was slithering towards him.

He couldn't have moved if he had wanted to, but something told him that keeping still was the only chance he had. The snake had to be some sort of boa constrictor, part of the Boidae family.

A useless piece of information he had picked up in biology class suddenly came back to him.

The snake ate mainly birds and monkeys, finding its victims by smell, then coiling round and suffocating them. But Alex knew that if the snake attacked him, this wouldn't be how he would die. The razors and spikes would cut him to pieces.

And it was getting closer. Wave after wave of glinting silver rippled behind it as it dragged the razors along. Now it was just a metre away. Moving very slowly, Alex lowered the crossbow from his shoulder. He pulled the wire back to load it, then reached into the waistband of his trousers. The broken spear was still there. Trying not to give the snake any reason to attack him, Alex fixed the length of wood into the stock. He was lucky. The spear was exactly the right length.

He wasn't meant to have a weapon in this zone. That hadn't been part of the program. But despite everything Cray had thrown at him he still had the crossbow and now it was loaded.

Alex cried out. He couldn't help himself. The snake had suddenly jerked forward, dragging itself over his trainer. The razors cut into the soft material, only millimetres away from his foot. He instinctively kicked out. At once the snake reared back. Alex saw black flames ignite in its eyes.

Its tongue flickered. It was about to launch itself at him. He brought the crossbow round and fired.

There was nothing else he could do. The bolt entered the snake's mouth and continued out of the back of its head. Alex leapt back, avoiding the deadly convulsions of the creature's body.

The snake thrashed and twisted, cutting the grass and the nearby bushes to shreds. Then it lay still.

Alex knew that he had killed it, and he wasn't sorry. What had been done to the snake was revolting. He was glad he had put it out of its misery.

There was one more zone left—the mirror maze. Alex knew that there would be Aztec gods waiting for him. Probably guards in fancy dress. Even if he got past them, he would only find himself facing the pool of fire. But he'd had enough. To hell with Damian Cray. He looked up.

He had disabled one of the security cameras and there weren't any others in view. He had found a blind spot in this insane playground. That suited him perfectly.

It was time to find his own way out.

THE TRUTH ABOUT ALEX

There are no gods crueller or more ferocious than those of the Aztecs. That was the reason why Damian Cray had chosen them to inhabit his computer game.

He had summoned three of them to patrol the mirror maze, the fifth and last zone in the huge arena he had built beneath the compound. Tlaloc, the god of rain, was half human, half alligator, with jagged teeth, claw-like hands and a thick scaly tail that dragged behind him. Xipe Totec, the lord of spring, had torn out his own eyes. They were still dangling in front of his gruesome, pain-distorted face. And Xolotl, bringer of fire, walked on feet that had been smashed and wrenched round to face backwards. Flames leapt out of his hands, reflected a hundred times in the mirrors and adding to the twisting clouds of smoke.

Of course, there was nothing supernatural about the three creatures waiting for Alex to appear.

Beneath the grotesque masks, the plastic skin and make-up, they were nothing more than criminals, recently released from Bijlmer, the largest prison in the Netherlands. They now worked as guards for Cray Software Technology, but they had special duties too. This was one of them. The three men were armed with curved swords, javelins, steel claws and flame-throwers.

They were looking forward to using them.

It was the one dressed as Xolotl who saw Alex first.

The camera in zone three had gone down, so there had been no way of knowing if Alex was on his way or if the snake had finished him. But suddenly there was a movement. The guard saw a figure lurch round a corner, naked to the waist. The boy was making no attempt to hide, and the guard saw why.

Alex Rider was soaked in blood. His entire chest was bright red. His mouth was opening and closing, but no sound came out. Then the guard saw the wooden spear sticking out of his chest.

The boy had obviously tried to run down the corridor but hadn't quite made it. One of the spears had found its target.

Alex saw the guard and stopped. He dropped to his knees. One hand pointed limply at the spear, then fell. He looked upwards and tried to speak. More blood trickled out of his mouth. His eyes closed and he pitched to one side. He didn't move again.

The guard relaxed. The boy's death meant nothing to him. He reached into the pocket of his chain-mail shirt and took out a radio transmitter.

"It's over," he said, speaking in Dutch. "The boy's been killed by a spear."

Neon strips flickered on throughout the game zone. In the harsh white light the different zones seemed

cruder, more like fairground attractions. The guards, too, looked ridiculous in their fancy dress. The dangling eyes were painted ping-pong balls. The alligator body was nothing more than a rubber suit. The backward-facing feet could have come out of a joke shop. The three of them formed a circle around Alex.

“He’s still breathing,” one of them said.

“Not for much longer.” The second guard glanced at the point of the spear, covered in rapidly congealing blood.

“What shall we do with him?”

“Leave him here. It’s not our job. Disposal can pick him up later.”

They walked away. One of them stopped beside a wall, painted to look like crumbling stone, and pulled open a concealed panel to reveal a button. He pressed it and the wall slid open. There was a brightly lit corridor on the other side. The three men went off to change.

Alex opened his eyes.

The trick he had played was so old that he was almost ashamed. If it had been done on the stage, it wouldn’t have fooled a six-year-old. But he supposed that circumstances were a little different here.

Left on his own in the miniature jungle, he had reclaimed the broken spear that he had used to kilt the snake. He had tied it to his chest using the wire he had torn out of the security camera.

Then he had covered himself with blood taken from the dead snake. That had been the worst part, but he’d had to make sure that the illusion would work. Steeling himself, he had scooped up some more of the blood and put it in his mouth. He could still taste it now and he was having to force himself not to swallow. But it had fooled the men completely. None of them had looked too closely. They had seen what they wanted to see.

Alex waited until he was certain he was alone, then sat up and untied the spear. He would just have to hope that the cameras had all been turned off when the game had ended. The exit was still open and Alex stole through, leaving the make-believe world behind him. He found himself in an ordinary corridor, stretching into the distance with tiled walls and plain wooden doors on either side. He knew that although the immediate danger was behind him, he could hardly afford to start relaxing yet. He was half naked and covered in blood. He was still trapped in the heart of the compound. And it could only be a matter of time before someone discovered that the body had disappeared and realized the trick that had been played.

He opened the first of the doors. It led into a storage cupboard. The second and third doors were locked, but halfway down the corridor he found a changing room with showers, lockers and a laundry basket. Alex knew that it would cost him precious minutes, but he had to get clean. He stripped and showered, then dried himself and got dressed again. Before he left the room he searched through the laundry basket and found a shirt to replace the one he had burnt. The shirt was dirty and two sizes too big, but he pulled it on gratefully.

Carefully he opened the door—and quickly closed it again as two men walked past, talking in Dutch. They seemed to be heading for the mirror maze, and Alex hoped they weren’t part of the disposal team. If so, the alarm would be raised at any moment. He counted the seconds until they had gone,

then crept out and hurried the other way.

He came to a staircase. He had no idea where it went, but he was certain he had to go up.

The stairs led to a circular area with several corridors leading off it. There were no windows. The only illumination came from industrial lights set at intervals in the ceiling. He looked at his watch. It was eleven fifteen. Two and a quarter hours had passed since he had first broken into the compound; it felt much longer. He thought about Jack, waiting for him in the hotel in Amsterdam. She would be out of her mind with worry.

Everything was silent. Alex guessed that most of Cray's people would be asleep. He chose a corridor and followed it to another staircase. Again he went up, and found himself in a room that he knew. Cray's study. The room where he had seen the man called Charlie Roper die.

Alex was almost afraid to go in. But the room was deserted and, peering through the opening, he could see that the bottle-shaped chamber had been cleared, the money and the body taken away.

It seemed strange to him that there should be no guard assigned to this room, at the very heart of Cray's network. But then again, why should there be? All the security was centred on the main gate. Alex was supposedly dead. Cray had nothing to fear.

Ahead of him was the staircase that he knew would lead up to the glass cube and out onto the square. But as tempted as he was to race over to it, Alex realized he would never have another opportunity like this. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that even if he made it to MI6, he still had no real proof that Cray wasn't just the pop celebrity and businessman that everyone thought. Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones hadn't believed him the last time he'd seen them.

They might not believe him again.

Ignoring his first instincts, Alex went over to the desk. There were about a dozen framed photographs on the surface, each and every one showing a picture of Damian Cray. Ignoring them, Alex turned his attention to the drawers. They were unlocked. The lower drawers contained dozens of different documents but most of them were nothing more than lists of figures and hardly looked promising. Then he came to the last drawer and let out a gasp of disbelief. The metallic capsule that Cray had been holding when he talked to the American was simply sitting there. Alex picked it up and weighed it in the palm of his hand. The flash drive. It contained computer codes. Its job was to break through some sort of security system. It had come with a price tag of two and a half million dollars. It had cost Roper his life.

And Alex had it! He wanted to examine it, but he could do that later. He slipped it into his trouser pocket and hurried over to the stairs.

Ten minutes later the alarms sounded throughout the compound. The two men that Alex had seen had indeed gone into the mirror maze to pick up the body and discovered that it wasn't there.

They should have raised the alarm at once, but there had been a delay. The men had assumed that one of the other teams must have collected it and had gone to find them. It was only when they discovered the dead snake and the spear with the coil of wire that they put together what had taken place.

While this was happening, a van was driving out of the compound. Neither the tired guards at the gate

nor the driver had noticed the figure lying flat, spreadeagled on the roof. But why should they? The van was leaving, not arriving. It didn't even stop in front of the security cameras. The guard merely checked the driver's ID and opened the gate. The alarm rang seconds after the van had passed through.

There was a system in place at Cray Software Technology. Nobody was allowed to enter or leave during a security alert. Every van was equipped with a two-way radio and the guard at the gate immediately signalled to the driver and told him to return. The driver stopped before he had even reached the traffic light and wearily obeyed. But it was already too late.

Alex slipped off the roof and dropped to the ground. Then he ran off into the night.

Damian Cray was back in his office, sitting on the sofa holding a glass of milk. He had been in bed when the alarm went off and now he was wearing a silver dressing gown, dark blue pyjamas and soft cotton slippers. Something bad had happened to his face. The life had drained out of it, leaving behind a cold, empty mask that could have been cut out of glass. A single vein throbbed above one of his glazed eyes.

Cray had just discovered that the flash drive had been taken from his desk. He had searched all the drawers, ripping them out, upturning them and scattering their contents across the floor.

Then, with an inarticulate howl of rage, he had thrown himself onto the desktop, flailing about with his arms and sending telephones, files and photograph frames flying. He had smashed a paperweight into his computer screen, shattering the glass. And then he had sat down on the sofa and called for a glass of milk.

Yassen Gregorovich had watched all this without speaking. He too had been called from his room by the alarm bells, but, unlike Cray, he hadn't been asleep. Yassen never slept for more than four hours. The night was too valuable. He might go for a run or work out in the gym. He might listen to classical music. On this night he had been working with a tape recorder and a well-thumbed exercise book. He was teaching himself Japanese, one of the nine languages he had made it his business to learn.

Yassen had heard the alarms and known instinctively that Alex Rider had escaped. He had turned off the tape recorder. And he had smiled.

Now he waited for Cray to break the silence. It had been Yassen who had suggested quietly that Cray should look for the flash drive. He wondered if he would get the blame for the theft.

"He was meant to be dead!" Cray moaned. "They told me he was dead!" He glanced at Yassen, suddenly angry. "You knew he'd been in here."

"I suspected it," Yassen said.

"Why?"

Yassen considered. "Because he's Alex," he said simply.

"Then tell me about him!"

"There is only so much I can tell you." Yassen stared into the distance. His face gave nothing away. "The truth about Alex is that there is not a boy in the world like him," he began, speaking slowly and

softly. “Consider for a moment. Tonight you tried to kill him—and not just simply with a bullet or a knife, but in a way that should have terrified him. He escaped and he found his way here. He must have seen the stairs. Any other boy—any man even—would have climbed them instantly. His only desire would have been to get out of here. But not Alex. He stopped; he searched. That is what makes him unique, and that is why he is so valuable to MI6.”

“How did he find his way here?”

“I don’t know. If you’d allowed me to question him before you sent him into that game of yours, I might have been able to find out.”

“This is not my fault, Mr Gregorovich! You should have killed him in the South of France when you had the chance.” Cray drank the milk and set the glass down. He had a white moustache on his upper lip. “Why didn’t you?” he demanded.

“I tried...”

“That nonsense in the bullring! That was stupid. I think you knew he’d escape.”

“I hoped he might,” Yassen agreed. He was beginning to get bored with Cray. He didn’t like being asked to explain himself, and when he spoke again it was almost as much for his own benefit as Cray’s. “I knew him...” he said.

“You mean ... before Saint-Pierre?”

“I met him once. But even then ... I knew him already. The moment I saw him, I knew who he was and what he was. The image of his father...” Yassen stopped himself. He had already said more than he had meant to. “He knows nothing of this,” he muttered. “No one has ever told him the truth.”

But Cray was no longer interested. “I can’t do anything without the flash drive,” he moaned, and suddenly there were tears brimming in his eyes. “It’s all over! Eagle Strike! All the planning.

Years and years of it. Millions of pounds. And it’s all your fault!”

So there it was at last, the finger of blame.

For a few seconds, Yassen Gregorovich was seriously tempted to kill Damian Cray. It would be very quick: a three-finger strike into the pale, flabby throat. Yassen had worked for many evil people—not that he ever thought of them in terms of good and evil. All that mattered to him was how much they were prepared to pay. Some of them—Herod Sayle, for example—had planned to kill millions of people. The numbers were irrelevant to Yassen. People died all the time. He knew that every time he drew a breath, at that exact moment, somewhere in the world a hundred or a thousand people would be taking their last. Death was everywhere; it could not be measured.

But recently something inside him had changed. Perhaps it was meeting Alex again that had done it; perhaps it was his age. Although Yassen looked as if he was in his late twenties, he was in fact thirty-five. He was getting old. Too old, anyway, for his line of work. He was beginning to think it might be time to stop.

And that was why he now decided not to murder Damian Cray. Eagle Strike was only two days away. It would make him richer than he could have dreamt and it would allow him to return, at last, to his

hometown, Russia. He would buy a house in St Petersburg and live comfortably, perhaps doing occasional business with the Russian mafia. The city was teeming with criminal activity and for a man with his wealth and experience, anything would be possible.

Yassen stretched out a hand, the same hand he would have used to strike his employer down.

“You worry too much,” he said. “For all we know, Alex may still be in the compound. But even if he has made it through the gate, he can’t have gone far. He has to get out of Sloterdijk and back to Amsterdam. I have already instructed every man we have to get out there and find him. If he tries to get into the city, he will be intercepted.”

“How do you know he’s going into the city?” Cray demanded.

“It’s the middle of the night. Where else could he go?” Yassen stood up and yawned. “Alex Rider will be back here before sunrise and you will have your flash drive.”

“Good.” Cray looked at the wreckage scattered across the floor. “And next time I get my hands on him I’ll make sure he doesn’t walk away. Next time I’ll deal with him myself.”

Yassen said nothing. Turning his back on Damian Cray, he walked slowly out of the room.

PEDAL POWER

The local train pulled into Amsterdam's Central Station and began to slow down. Alex was sitting on his own, his face resting against the window, barely conscious of the long, empty platforms or the great canopy stretching over his head. It was around midnight and he was exhausted. He knew Jack would be frantic, waiting for him at the hotel. He was eager to see her. He suddenly felt a need to be looked after. He just wanted a hot bath, a hot chocolate ... and bed.

The first time he had gone out to Sloterdijk, he had cycled both ways. But the second time, he had saved his energy and left the bike at the station. The journey back was short but he was enjoying it, knowing that every second put Cray and his compound a few more metres behind him.

He also needed the time to think about what he had just been through, to try to understand what it all meant. A plane that burst into flames. A VIP lounge. Something called Milstar. The man with the pock-marked face...

And he still had no answer to the biggest question of all. Why was Cray doing all this? He was massively rich. He had fans all over the world. Only a few days ago he had been shaking hands with the president of the United States. His music was still played on the radio and his every appearance drew massive crowds. The Gameslayer system would make him another fortune. If ever there was a man who had no need to conspire and to kill, it was him.

Eagle Strike.

What did the two words mean?

The train came to a halt; the doors hissed open. Alex checked that the flash drive was still in his pocket and got out.

There was barely anyone around on the platform but the main ticket hall was more crowded.

Students and other young travellers were arriving on the international lines. Some of them were slumped on the floor, leaning against oversized rucksacks. They all looked spaced out in the hard, artificial light. Alex guessed it would take him about ten minutes to cycle down to the hotel on the Herengracht. If he was awake enough to remember where it was.

He passed through the heavy glass doors and found his bike where he had left it, chained to some railings. He had just unlocked it when he stopped, sensing the danger before he even saw it. This was something he had never learnt. Even his uncle, who had spent years training him to be a spy, would have been unable to explain it; the instinct that now told him he had to move—and fast.

He looked around him. There was a wide cobbled area leading down to an expanse of water, with the city beyond. A kiosk selling hot dogs was still open. Sausages were turning over a burner but there was no sign of the vendor. A few couples were strolling across the bridges over the canals, enjoying

a night that had become warm and dry. The sky wasn't black so much as a deep midnight blue.

Somewhere a clock struck the hour, the chimes echoing across the city.

Alex noticed a car, parked so that it faced the station. Its headlamps blinked on, throwing a beam of light across the square towards him. A moment later a second car did the same. Then a third.

All three cars were the same: two-seater Smart cars. More lights came on. There were six vehicles parked in a semicircle around him, covering every angle of the station square. They were all black. With their short bodies and slightly bulbous driving compartments, they looked almost like toys. But Alex knew with a feeling of cold certainty that they weren't here for fun.

Doors swung open. Men stepped out, turned into black silhouettes by their own headlamps. For a split second nobody moved. They had him. There was nowhere for him to go.

Alex stretched out his left thumb, moving it towards the bell that still looked ridiculous, attached to the handlebar of his bike. There was a small silver lever sticking out. Pushing it would ring the bell. Alex pulled. The top of the bell sprang open to reveal five buttons inside, each one a different colour. Smithers had described them in the manual. They were colour-coded for ease of use. Now it was time to find out if they worked.

As if sensing that something was about to happen, the black shadows had begun to move across the square. Alex pressed the orange button and felt the shudder beneath his hands as two tiny heat-seeking missiles exploded out of the ends of the handlebars. Trailing orange flames, they shot across the square. Alex saw the men stop, uncertain. The missiles soared into the air, then curved back, their movement perfectly synchronized. As Alex had suspected, the hottest thing in the square was the grill in the hot-dog kiosk. The missiles fell on it, both striking at exactly the same time. There was a huge explosion, a fireball of flame that spread across the cobbles and was reflected in the water of the canal. Burning fragments of wood and pieces of sausage rained down. The blast hadn't been strong enough to kill anyone, but it had created the perfect diversion. Alex grabbed the bike and dragged it back into the station. The square was blocked.

This was the only way.

But even as he re-entered the ticket hall, he saw other men running across the concourse towards him. At this time of night the crowds were moving slowly. Anyone running had to have a special reason, and Alex knew for certain that the reason was him. Cray's men must have been in radio contact with each other. Now that one group had spotted him, they would all know where he was.

He jumped on the bike and pedalled along the flat stone floor as fast as he could: past the ticket booths, the newspaper kiosks, the information boards and the ramps leading up to the platforms, trying to put as much space as he could between himself and his pursuers. A woman pushing a motorized cleaning machine stepped in front of him and he had to swerve, almost knocking over a bearded man with a vast rucksack. The man swore at him in German. Alex raced on.

There was a door at the very end of the main hall, but before he could reach it, it burst open and more men came running in, blocking his way. Pedalling furiously, Alex spun the bike round and headed for the one way out of this nightmare. An empty escalator, going down. Before he even knew what he was doing, he had launched himself onto the metal treads and was bouncing and shuddering head first into the ground. He was thrown from side to side, his body slamming against the steel panels. He wondered if the front wheel would crumple with the strain or if the tyres would puncture against the

sharp edges. But then he had reached the bottom and he was riding—bizarrely—through a subway station, with ticket windows on one side and automatic gates on the other. He was glad it was so late. The station was almost empty. But still a few heads turned in astonishment as he entered a long passageway and disappeared from sight.

It was definitely the wrong time for this, but even so Alex found himself admiring the Bad Boy's handling ability. The aluminium frame was light and manageable but the solid down tube kept the bike stable. He came to a corner and automatically went into attack position. He pressed down on the outside pedal and put his weight on it, at the same time keeping his body low. His entire centre of gravity was focused on the point where the tyres came into contact with the ground, and the bike took the corner with total control. This was something Alex had learnt years ago, mountain biking in the Pennines. He had never expected to use the same techniques in a subway station under Amsterdam!

A second escalator brought him back up to street level and Alex found himself on the other side of the square, away from the station. The remains of the hot-dog kiosk were still burning. A police car had arrived and he could see the hysterical hot-dog salesman trying to explain what had happened to an officer. For a moment he hoped he would be able to slip away unnoticed. But then he heard the screech of tyres as one of the Smart cars skidded backwards in an arc and then shot forward in his direction. They had seen him! And they were after him again.

He began to pedal down the Damrak, one of the main streets in Amsterdam, quickly picking up speed. He glanced back. A second Smart car had joined the first, and with a sinking heart he knew that his legs would be no match for their engines. He had perhaps twenty seconds before they caught up with him.

Then a bell clanged and there was a loud metallic clattering. A tram was coming towards him, thundering along the tracks on its way to the station. Alex knew what he had to do. He could hear the Smart cars coming up behind him. The tram was a great metal box, filling his vision ahead. At the very last moment, he twisted the handlebars, throwing himself directly in front of the tram. He saw the driver's horrified face, felt the bicycle wheels shudder as they crossed the tracks. But then he was on the other side and the tram had become a wall that would—at least for a few seconds—separate him from the Smart cars.

Even so, one of them tried to follow. It was a terrible mistake. The car was halfway across the tracks when the tram hit it. There was a huge crash and the car spun away into the night. It was followed by a terrible grinding and metallic screaming as the tram derailed. The tram's second carriage whipped round and hit the other Smart car, batting it away like a fly. As Alex pedalled away from the Damrak, across a pretty, white-painted bridge, he left behind him a scene of total devastation, the first police sirens cutting through the air.

He found himself cycling through a series of narrow streets that were more crowded, with people drifting in and out of pornographic cinemas and striptease clubs. He had accidentally drifted into the famous red-light district of Amsterdam. He wondered what Jack would make of that. A woman standing in a doorway winked at him. Alex ignored her and rode on.

There were three black motorbikes at the end of the street.

Alex groaned. They were 400cc Suzuki Bandits and there could only be one reason why they were

there, silent and unmoving. They were waiting for him. The moment their riders saw him, they kick-started their engines. Alex knew he had to get away—and fast. He looked around.

On one side of him dozens of people were streaming in and out of a parade of neon-lit shops. On the other a narrow canal stretched into the distance, with darkness and possible safety on the other side. But how was he going to get across? There wasn't a bridge in sight.

But perhaps there was a way. A boat was turning. It was one of the famous glass-topped cruisers, sitting low in the water and carrying tourists on a late-night dinner cruise. It had swung diagonally across the water so that it was almost touching both banks. The captain had misjudged the angle, and the boat seemed to be jammed.

Alex propelled himself forward. Simultaneously he pressed the green button under the bicycle bell. There was a water bottle suspended upside down under his saddle and out of the corner of his eye he saw a silver-grey liquid squirt out onto the road. He was hurtling towards the canal, leaving a snail-like trail behind him. He heard the roar of the Suzuki motorbikes and knew that they had caught up with him. Then everything happened at once.

Alex left the road, crossed the pavement and forced the bike up into the air. The first of the motorbikes reached the section of road that was covered with the ooze. At once the driver lost control, skidding so violently that he almost seemed to be throwing himself off on purpose. His bike smashed into a second bike, bringing that one down too. At the same time, Alex came down onto the reinforced glass roof of the tourist boat and began to pedal its full length. He could see diners gazing up at him in astonishment. A waiter with a tray of glasses spun round, dropping everything. There was the flash of a camera. Then he had reached the other side. Carried by his own momentum, he soared off the roof, over a line of bollards, and came to a skidding halt on the opposite bank of the canal. He looked back—just in time to see that the third Bandit had managed to follow him. It was already in the air and the diners on the boat were gazing up in alarm as it descended towards them. They were right to be scared. The motorbike was too heavy.

It crashed onto the glass roof, which shattered beneath it. Bike and rider disappeared into the cabin as the tourists, screaming, threw themselves out of the way. Plates and tables exploded; the lights in the cabin fused and went out. Alex didn't have time to see more.

He wasn't going to be able to hide in the darkness after all. Another pair of Bandits had found him, roaring up the side of the canal towards him. Pedalling frantically, he tried to get out of sight, turning into one road, cutting down another, around a corner, across a square. His legs and thighs were on fire. He knew he couldn't go on much further.

And then he made his mistake.

It was an alleyway, dark and inviting. It would lead him somewhere he wouldn't be found. That was what he thought. But he was only halfway down it when a man suddenly stepped out in front of him, holding a machine gun. Behind him the two Bandits edged closer, cutting off the way back.

The man with the machine gun took aim. Alex's finger stabbed down, this time finding the yellow button. At once there was an explosion of brilliant white light as the magnesium flare concealed inside the Digital Evolution headlight ignited. Alex couldn't believe how much light was pouring out

of the bike. The whole area was illuminated. The man with the machine gun was completely blinded.

Alex hit the blue button. There was a loud hiss. Somewhere under his legs a cloud of blue smoke poured out of the air pump connected to the bicycle frame. The two Bandits had been chasing up behind him, and they now plunged into the smoke and disappeared.

Everything was chaotic. Brilliant light and thick smoke. The man with the machine gun opened fire, sensing that Alex must be somewhere near.

But Alex was already passing him and the bullets went wide, slicing into the first Bandit and killing the driver instantly. Somehow the second Bandit managed to get through, but then there was a thud, a scream and the sound of metal smashing into brick. The clatter of bullets stopped and Alex smiled grimly to himself, realizing what had happened. The man with the machine gun had just been run over by his friend on the bike.

His smite faded as yet another Smart car appeared from nowhere, still some distance away but already getting closer. How many of them were there? Surely Cray's people would decide they'd had enough and give it a rest. But then Alex remembered the flash drive in his pocket and knew that Cray would rip all Amsterdam apart to get it back.

There was a bridge ahead of him, an old-fashioned construction of wood and metal with thick cables and counterweights. It crossed a much wider canal and there was a single barge approaching it. Alex was puzzled. The bridge was far too low to allow the barge to pass. Then a red traffic light blinked on; the bridge began to lift. Alex glanced back. The Smart car was about fifty metres behind him and this time there was nowhere to hide, nowhere else to go. He looked ahead of him. If he could just get to the other side of this canal, he really would be able to disappear. Nobody would be able to follow—at least not until the bridge had come down again.

But it looked as if he was already too late. The bridge had split in half, both sections rising at the same speed, the gap over the water widening with every second.

The Smart car was accelerating.

Alex had no choice.

Feeling the pain, and knowing that he had reached the last reserves of his strength, Alex pushed down and the bike picked up speed. The car's engine was louder now, howling in his ears, but he didn't dare look back again. All his energy was focused on the rapidly rising bridge.

He hit the wooden surface when it was at a forty-five degree slant. Insanely he found himself thinking of some long-forgotten maths lesson at school. A right-angled triangle. He could see it clearly on the board. And he was cycling up its side!

He wasn't going to make it. Every time he pushed down on the pedals it was a little harder, and he was barely halfway up the slope. He could see the gap—huge now—and the dark, cold water below. The car was right behind him. It was so close he could hear nothing apart from its engine, and the smell of petrol filled his nostrils. He pedalled one last time—and at the same moment pressed the red button in the bell: the ejector seat. There was a soft explosion right below him.

The saddle had rocketed off the bike, propelled by compressed air or some sort of ingenious

hydraulic system. Alex shot into the air, over his side of the bridge, over the gap and then down onto the other side, rolling over and over as he tumbled all the way down. As he spun round, he saw the Smart car. Incredibly, it had tried to follow him. It was suspended in mid-air between the two halves of the bridge. He could see the driver's face, the open eyes, the gritted teeth. Then the car plunged down. There was a great splash and it sank at once beneath the black surface of the canal.

Alex got painfully to his feet. The saddle was lying next to him and he picked it up. There was a message underneath. He wouldn't have been able to read it while the saddle was attached to the frame. *If you can read this, you owe me a new bike.* Smithers had a warped sense of humour.

Carrying the saddle, Alex began to limp back to the hotel. He was too tired to smile.

EMERGENCY MEASURES

It was five o'clock when Alex arrived at London's City Airport, the end of a long, frustrating day that had seen him travelling by road and by air across three countries. He and Jack had taken the bus from Amsterdam to Antwerp, arriving just too late for the lunchtime flight. They had killed three hours at the airport, finally boarding an old-fashioned Fokker 50 that seemed to take for ever crossing over to England. Alex wondered now if he had wasted too much time avoiding Damian Cray. A whole day had gone. But at least the airport was on the right side of London, not too far from Liverpool Street and the offices of MI6.

Alex intended to take the flash drive straight to Alan Blunt. He would have telephoned ahead but he couldn't be sure that Blunt would even take the call. One thing was certain. He wouldn't feel safe until he had handed over the device. Once MI6 had it in their hands, he would be able to relax.

That was his plan—but everything changed as he stepped into the arrivals hall. There was a woman sitting at a coffee bar reading the evening newspaper. The front page was open. It was almost as if it had been put there for Alex to see. A photograph of Sabina. And a headline: **Schoolgirl Disappears from Hospital**

"This way," Jack was saying. "We can get a cab."

"Jack!"

Jack saw the look on his face and followed his eyes to the newspaper. Without saying another word, she hurried into the airport's only shop and bought a copy for herself.

There wasn't very much to the story—but at this stage there wasn't a lot to tell. A fifteen-year-old schoolgirl from south London had been visiting her father at Whitchurch Hospital that morning. He had recently been injured in a terrorist incident in the South of France. Inexplicably she had never reached the ward, but instead had vanished into thin air. The police were urging any witnesses to come forward. Her mother had already made a television appeal for Sabina to come home.

"It's Cray," Alex said. His voice was empty. "He's got her."

"Oh God, Alex." Jack sounded as wretched as he felt. "He's done this to get the flash drive. We should have thought..."

"There was no way we could have expected this. How did he even know she was my friend?"

Alex thought for a moment. "Yassen." He answered his own question. "He must have told Cray."

"You have to go to MI6 straight away. It's the only thing you can do."

"No. I want to go home first."

"Alex—why?"

Alex looked down at the picture one last time, then crumpled the page in his hands. "Cray may have left a message for me," he said.

There was a message. But it came in a form that Alex hadn't quite expected.

Jack had gone into the house first, checking to make sure there was no one waiting for them.

Then she called Alex. She looked grim as she stood at the front door.

"It's in the sitting room," she said.

"It" was a brand-new widescreen television. Someone had been into the house. They had brought the television and left it in the middle of the room. There was a webcam perched on top; a brand-new red cable snaked into a junction box in the wall.

"A present from Cray," Jack murmured.

"I don't think it's a present," Alex said.

There was a remote control next to the webcam. Reluctantly Alex picked it up. He knew he wasn't going to like what he was about to see, but there was no way he could ignore it. He turned the television on.

The screen flickered and cleared and suddenly he found himself face to face with Damian Cray.

Somehow he wasn't surprised. He wondered if Cray had returned to England or if he was transmitting from Amsterdam. He knew that this was a live image and that his own picture would be sent back via the webcam. Slowly he sat down in front of the screen. He showed no emotion at all.

"Alex!" Cray looked relaxed and cheerful. His voice was so clear he could have been in the room with them. "I'm so glad you got back safely. I've been waiting to speak to you."

"Where's Sabina?" Alex asked.

"Where's Sabina? Where's Sabina? How very sweet! Young love!"

The image changed. Alex heard Jack gasp. Sabina was lying on a bunk in a bare room. Her hair was dishevelled but otherwise she seemed unhurt. She looked up at the camera and Alex could see the fear and confusion in her eyes.

Then the picture switched back to Cray. "We haven't damaged her... yet," he said. "But that could change at any time."

"I'm not giving you the flash drive," Alex said.

"Hear me out, Alex." Cray leant forward so that he seemed to come closer to the screen. "Young people these days are so hot-headed! I've gone to a great deal of trouble and expense on account of you. And the thing is, you are going to give me the flash drive because if you don't your girlfriend is going to die, and you are going to see it on video."

"Don't listen to him, Alex!" Jack exclaimed.

"He is listening to me and I'd ask you not to interrupt!" Cray smiled. He seemed totally confident, as if this were nothing more than another celebrity interview. "I can imagine what's going through your mind," he went on, speaking again to Alex. "You're thinking of going to your friends at MI6. I would

seriously advise against it.”

“How do you know we haven't been to them already?” Jack asked.

“I very much hope you haven't,” Cray replied. “Because I am a very nervous man. If I think anyone is making enquiries about me, I will kill the girl. If I find myself being watched by people I don't know, I will kill the girl. If a policeman so much as glances at me in the street, I may well kill the girl. And this I promise you. If you do not bring me the flash drive, personally, before ten o'clock tomorrow morning, I will certainly kill the girl.”

“No!” Alex was defiant.

“You can lie to me, Alex, but you can't lie to yourself. You don't work for MI6. They mean nothing to you. But the girl does. If you abandon her, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. And it won't end with her. I will hunt down the rest of your friends. Don't underestimate my power! I will destroy everything and everyone you know. And then I will come after you. So don't kid yourself. Get it over with now. Give me what I want.” There was a long silence.

“Where can I find you?” Alex asked. The words tasted sour in his mouth. They tasted of defeat.

“I am at my house in Wiltshire. You can get a taxi from Bath station. All the drivers know where I live.”

“If I bring it to you...” Alex found himself struggling to find the right words. “How do I know that you'll let her go? How do I know you'll let either of us go?”

“Exactly!” Jack had chipped in again. “How do we know we can trust you?”

“I'm a knight of the realm!” Cray exclaimed. “The Queen trusts me; you can too!”

The screen went blank.

Alex turned to Jack. For once he was helpless. “What do I do?” he asked.

“Ignore him, Alex. Go to MI6.”

“I can't, Jack. You heard what he said. Before ten o'clock tomorrow morning, MI6 won't be able to do anything before then, and if they try something, Cray will kill Sab.” He rested his head in his hands. “I couldn't allow that to happen. She's only in this mess because of me. I couldn't live with myself afterwards.”

“But, Alex... A lot more people could get hurt if Eagle Strike—whatever it is—goes ahead.”

“We don't know that.”

“You think Cray would do all this if he was just going to rob a bank or something?”

Alex said nothing.

“Cray is a killer, Alex. I'm sorry. I wish I could be more helpful. But I don't think you can just walk into his house.”

Alex thought about it. He thought for a long time. As long as Cray had Sabina, he held all the cards. But perhaps there was a way he could get her out of there. It would mean giving himself up. Once

again he would become Cray's prisoner. But with Sabina free, Jack would be able to contact MI6. And perhaps—just perhaps—Alex might come out of this alive.

Quickly he outlined his idea to Jack. She listened—but the more she heard, the unhappier she looked.

"It's terribly dangerous, Alex," she said.

"But it might work."

"You can't give him the flash drive."

"I won't give him the flash drive, Jack."

"And if it all goes wrong?"

Alex shrugged. "Then Cray wins. Eagle Strike happens." He tried to smile, but there was no humour in his voice. "But at least we'll finally find out what it is."

The house was on the edge of the Bath valley, a twenty-minute drive from the station. Cray had been right about one thing. The taxi driver knew where it was without needing a map or an address—and as the car rolled down the private lane towards the main entrance, Alex understood why.

Damian Cray lived in an Italian convent. According to the newspapers, he had seen it in Umbria, fallen in love with it and shipped it over, brick by brick. The building really was extraordinary. It seemed to have taken over much of the surrounding countryside, cut off from public view by a tall, honey-coloured brick wall with two carved wooden gates at least ten metres high. Beyond the wall Alex could see a slanting roof of terracotta tiles, and beyond it an elaborate tower with pillars, arched windows and miniature battlements. Much of the garden had been imported from Italy too, with dark green, twisting cypresses and olive trees. Even the weather didn't seem quite English. The sun had come out and the sky was a radiant blue. It had to be the hottest day of the year.

Alex paid the driver and got out. He was wearing a pale grey, short-sleeved Trailrider cycling jersey without the elbow pads. As he walked down to the gates, he loosened the zip that ran up to the neck, allowing the breeze to play against his skin. There was a rope coming out of a hole in the wall and he pulled it. A bell rang out. Alex reflected that once this same bell might have called the nuns from their prayers. It seemed somehow wicked that a holy place should have been uprooted and brought here to be a madman's lair.

The gates opened electronically. Alex walked through and found himself in a cloister: a rectangle of perfectly mown grass surrounded by statues of saints. Ahead there was a fourteenth-century chapel with a villa attached, the two somehow existing in perfect harmony. He smelt lemons in the air. Pop music drifted from somewhere in the house. Alex recognized the song. White Lines: Cray was playing his own CD.

The front door of the house stood open. There was still nobody in sight, so Alex walked inside.

The door led directly into a wide airy space with beautiful furniture arranged over a quarry-tiled floor. There was a grand piano made of rosewood, and a number of paintings, medieval altar pieces, were hanging on plain white walls. A row of six windows looked out onto a terrace with a garden beyond. White muslin curtains, hanging ceiling to floor, swayed gently in the breeze.

Damian Cray was sitting on an ornately carved wooden seat with a white poodle curled up in his lap.

He glanced up as Alex came into the room. "Ah, there you are, Alex." He stroked the dog.

"This is Bubbles. Isn't he beautiful?"

"Where's Sabina?" Alex asked.

Cray scowled. "I'm not going to be dictated to, if you don't mind," he said. "Especially not in my own home."

"Where is she?"

"All right!" The moment of anger had passed. Cray stood up and the dog jumped off his lap and ran out of the room. He crossed over to the desk and pressed a button. A few seconds later a door opened and Yassen Gregorovich came in. Sabina was with him. Her eyes widened when she saw Alex but she was unable to speak. Her hands were tied and there was a piece of tape across her mouth. Yassen forced her into a chair and stood over her. His eyes avoided Alex.

"You see, Alex, here she is," Cray said. "A little scared, perhaps, but otherwise unhurt."

"Why have you tied her up?" Alex demanded. "Why won't you let her talk?"

"Because she said some very hurtful things to me," Cray replied. "She also tried to assault me. In fact, frankly she has behaved in a very unladylike way." He scowled. "Now—you have something for me."

This was the moment that Alex had dreaded. He had a plan. Sitting on the train from London to Bath, in the taxi, and even walking into the house, he had been certain it would work. Now, facing Damian Cray, he suddenly wasn't so sure.

He reached into his pocket and took out the flash drive. The silver capsule had a lid, which Alex had opened, revealing a maze of circuitry inside. He had taped a brightly coloured tube in place, the nozzle pointing into the device. He held it up so that Cray could see.

"What is that?" Cray demanded.

"It's superglue," Alex replied. "I don't know what's inside your precious flash drive, but I doubt it'll work if it's gummed up with this stuff. I just have to squeeze my hand and you can forget Eagle Strike. You can forget the whole thing."

"How very ingenious!" Cray giggled. "But I don't actually see the point."

"It's simple," Alex said. "You let Sabina go; she walks out of here. She goes to a pub or a house and she telephones me here. You can give her the number. Once I know she's safe, I'll give you the flash drive."

Alex was lying.

As soon as Sabina had gone, he would squeeze the tube anyway. The flash drive would be filled with superglue, which would harden almost immediately. Alex was fairly sure it would make the device inoperable. He had no qualms about double-crossing Cray. It had been his plan all along.

He didn't like to think what would happen to him, but that didn't matter. Sabina would be free.

And as soon as Jack knew she was safe, she would be able to act. Jack would call MI6.

Somehow Alex would have to stay alive until they arrived.

“Was this your idea?” Cray asked. Alex said nothing so he went on. “It’s very clever. Very cute. But the question is...” He raised a finger on each hand. “Will it work?”

“I mean what I say.” Alex held out the flash drive. “Let her go.”

“But what if she goes straight to the police?”

“She won’t.”

Sabina tried to shout her disagreement from behind the gag. Alex took a breath.

“You’ll still have me,” he explained. “If Sabina goes to the police, you can do whatever you want to me. So that’ll stop her. Anyway, she doesn’t know what you’re planning. There’s nothing she can do.”

Cray shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“What?”

“No deal!”

“Are you serious?” Alex closed his hand around the tube.

“Entirely.”

“What about Eagle Strike?”

“What about your girlfriend?” There was a heavy pair of kitchen scissors on the desk. Before Alex could say anything, Cray picked them up and threw them to Yassen. Sabina began to struggle furiously, but the Russian held her down. “You’ve made a simple miscalculation, Alex,”

Cray continued. “You’re very brave. You would do almost anything to have the girl released.

But I will do anything to keep her. And I wonder how much you’ll be prepared to watch, how far I’ll have to go, before you decide that you might as well give me the flash drive anyway. A finger, maybe? Two fingers?”

Yassen opened the scissors. Sabina had suddenly gone very quiet and still. Her eyes pleaded with Alex.

“No!” Alex yelled. With a wave of despair he knew that Cray had won. He had gambled on at least getting Sabina out of here. But it wasn’t to be.

Cray saw the defeat in his eyes. “Give it to me!” he demanded.

“No.”

“Start with the little finger, Yassen. Then we’ll work one at a time towards her thumb.”

Tears formed in Sabina’s eyes. She couldn’t hide her terror.

Alex felt sick. Sweat trickled down the sides of his body under his shirt. There was nothing more he could do. He wished now that he had listened to Jack. He wished he had never come.

He threw the flash drive onto the desk.

Cray picked it up.

“Well that’s got that sorted,” he said with a smile. “Now, why don’t we forget all this unpleasantness and go and have a cup of tea?”

INSANITY AND BISCUITS

Tea was served outside on the lawn—but it was a lawn the size of a field in a garden like nothing Alex had ever seen before. Cray had built himself a fantasy land in the English countryside, with dozens of pools, fountains, miniature temples and grottoes. There was a rose garden and a statue garden, a garden filled entirely with white flowers, and another given over to herbs, which had been laid out like sections in a clock. And all around him he had constructed replicas of buildings that Alex recognized. The Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum in Rome, the Taj Mahal, the Tower of London: each one was exactly one hundredth the scale of the original and all of them were jumbled together like picture postcards scattered on the floor. It was the garden of a man who wanted to rule the world but couldn't, and so had cut the world down to his own size.

“What do you think of it?” Cray asked as he joined Alex at the table.

“Some gardens have crazy paving,” Alex replied quietly, “but I've never seen anything as crazy as this.”

Cray smiled.

There were five of them sitting on the raised terrace outside the house: Cray, Alex, Yassen, the man called Henryk and Sabina. She had been untied and the gag taken off her mouth—and as soon as she had been freed, she had rushed over to Alex and thrown her arms around his neck.

“I'm so sorry,” she had whispered. “I should have believed you.”

That was all she had said. Apart from that she had been silent, her face pale. Alex knew that she was afraid. It was typical of Sabina not to want to show it.

“Well, here we all are. One happy family,” Cray said. He pointed at the man with the silver hair and the pock-marked face. Now that he was closer to him, Alex could see that he was very ugly indeed. His eyes, magnified by the glasses, were slightly inflamed. He wore a denim shirt that was too tight and showed off his paunch.

“I don't think you've met Henryk,” Cray added.

“I don't think I want to,” Alex said.

“You mustn't be a bad loser, Alex. Henryk is very valuable to me. He flies jumbo jets.”

Jumbo jets. Another piece of the puzzle.

“So where is he flying you?” Alex asked. “I hope it's somewhere far away.”

Cray smiled to himself. “We'll come to that in a moment. In the meantime, shall I be mother?

It's Earl Grey; I hope you don't mind. And do help yourself to a biscuit.”

Cray poured five cups and set the pot down. Yassen hadn't spoken yet. Alex got the feeling that the

Russian was uncomfortable being here. And that was another strange thing. He had always considered Yassen to be his worst enemy, but sitting here now he seemed almost irrelevant. This was all about Damian Cray.

“We have an hour before we have to leave,” Cray said. “So I thought I might tell you a little about myself. I thought it might pass the time.”

“I’m not really all that interested,” Alex said.

Cray’s smile grew a little thinner. “I can’t believe that’s true. You seem to have been interesting yourself in me for a considerable time.” “You tried to kill my father,” Sabina said. Cray turned round, surprised to hear her voice.

“Yes, that’s right,” he admitted. “And if you’ll just shut up, I’m about to tell you why.”

He paused. A pair of butterflies shimmered around a bed of lavender.

“I have had an extremely interesting and privileged life,” Cray began. “My parents were rich.

Super rich, you might say. But not super. My father was a businessman and he was frankly rather boring. My mother didn’t do anything very much; I didn’t much like her either. I was an only child and naturally I was fabulously spoilt. I sometimes think that I was richer when I was eight years old than most people will be in their lifetime!”

“Do we have to listen to this?” Alex asked.

“If you interrupt me again, I’ll ask Yassen to get the scissors,” Cray replied. He went on. “I had my first serious row with my parents when I was thirteen. You see, they’d sent me to the Royal Academy in London. I was an extremely talented singer. But the trouble was, I hated it there.

Bach and Beethoven and Mozart and Verdi. I was a teenager, for heaven’s sake! I wanted to be Elvis Presley; I wanted to be in a pop group; I wanted to be famous!

“My father got very upset when I told him. He turned up his nose at anything popular. He really thought I’d failed him, and I’m afraid my mother agreed. They both had this idea that one day I’d be singing opera at Covent Garden or something ghastly like that. They didn’t want me to leave.

In fact, they wouldn’t let me—and I don’t know what would have happened if they hadn’t had that extraordinary accident with the car. It fell on them, you know. I can’t say I was terribly upset, although of course I had to pretend. But you know what I thought? I thought that God must be on my side. He wanted me to be a success and so He had decided to help me.”

Alex glanced at Sabina to see how she was taking this. She was sitting rigidly in her chair, her cup of tea ignored. There was absolutely no colour in her face. But she was still in control. She wasn’t giving anything away.

“Anyway,” Cray continued, “the best thing was that my parents were out of the way and, even better, I had inherited all their money. When I was twenty-one, I bought myself a flat in London—actually it was more of a penthouse—and I set up my own band. We called ourselves Slam! As I’m sure you know, the rest is history. Five years later I went solo, and soon I was the greatest singer in the world. And that was when I started to think about the world I was in.

“I wanted to help people. All my life I’ve wanted to help people. The way you’re looking at me, Alex, you’d think I’m some kind of monster. But I’m not. I’ve raised millions of pounds for charity. Millions and millions. And I should remind you, in case you’ve forgotten, that I have been knighted by the Queen. I am actually Sir Damian Cray, although I don’t use the title because I’m no snob. A lovely lady, by the way, the Queen. Do you know how much money my Christmas single, „Something for the Children“, raised all on its own? Enough to feed a whole country!

“But the trouble is, sometimes being famous and being rich isn’t enough. I so wanted to make a difference—but what was I to do when people wouldn’t listen? I mean, take the case of the Milburn Institute in Bristol. This was a laboratory working for a number of cosmetics companies, and I discovered that they were testing many of their products on animals. Now, I’m sure you and I would be on the same side about this, Alex. I tried to stop them. I campaigned for over a year. We had a petition with twenty thousand signatures and still they wouldn’t listen. So in the end—I’d met people and of course I had plenty of money—I suddenly realized that the best thing to do would be to have Professor Milburn killed. And that’s what I did. And six months later the institute closed down and that was that. No more animals harmed.”

Cray rotated a hand over the biscuit plate and picked one out. He was obviously pleased with himself.

“I had quite a lot of people killed in the years that followed,” he said. “For example, there were some extremely unpleasant people cutting down the rainforest in Brazil. They’re still in the rainforest ... six feet underneath it. Then there was a whole boatload of Japanese fishermen who wouldn’t listen to me. I had them deep-frozen in their own freezer. That will teach them not to hunt rare whales! And there was a company in Yorkshire that was selling landmines. I didn’t like them at all. So I arranged for the entire board of directors to disappear on an Outward Bound course in the Lake District and that put a stop to that!

“I’ve had to do some terrible things in my time. Really, I have.” He turned to Sabina. “I did hate having to blow up your father. If he hadn’t spied on me, it wouldn’t have been necessary. But you must see that I couldn’t let him spoil my plans.”

Every cell in Sabina’s body had gone rigid and Alex knew she was having to force herself not to attack Cray. But Yassen was sitting right next to her and she wouldn’t have got anywhere near.

Cray went on. “This is a terrible world, and if you want to make a difference, sometimes you have to be a bit extreme. And that’s the point. I am extremely proud of the fact that I have helped so many people and so many different causes. Because helping people—charity—has been the work of my life.”

He paused long enough to eat the biscuit he had chosen.

Alex forced himself to drink a little of the perfumed tea. He hated the taste but his mouth was completely dry. “I have a couple of questions,” he said.

“Do, please, go ahead.”

“My first one is for Yassen Gregorovich.” He turned to the Russian. “Why are you working for this lunatic?” Alex wondered if Cray would hit him. But it would be worth it. All the signs indicated that

the Russian didn't share Cray's world view. He seemed uncomfortable, out of place. It might be worth trying to sow a few seeds of discord between them.

Cray scowled, but did nothing. He signalled to Yassen to answer.

"He pays me," Yassen said simply.

"I hope your second question is more interesting," Cray snarled.

"Yes. You're trying to tell me that everything you've done is for a good cause. You think that all this killing is worth it because of the results. I'm not sure I agree. Lots of people work for charity; lots of people want to change the world. But they don't have to behave like you."

"I'm waiting..." Cray snapped.

"All right. This is my question. What is Eagle Strike? Are you really telling me it's a plan to make the world a better place?"

Cray laughed softly. For a moment he looked like the diabolical schoolboy he had once been, welcoming his own parents' death. "Yes," he said. "That's exactly what it is. Sometimes great people are misunderstood. You don't understand me and neither does your girlfriend. But I really do want to change the world. That's all I've ever wanted. And I've been very fortunate because my music has made it possible. In the twenty-first century, entertainers are much more influential than politicians or statesmen. I'm the only one who's actually noticed it." Cray chose a second biscuit—a custard cream. "Let me ask you a question, Alex. What do you think is the greatest evil on this planet today?" "Is that including or not including you?" Alex asked.

Cray frowned. "Please don't irritate me," he warned.

"I don't know," Alex said. "You tell me." "Drugs!" Cray spat out the single word as if it were obvious. "Drugs are causing more unhappiness and destruction than anything anywhere in the world. Drugs kill more people than war or terrorism. Did you know that drugs are the single biggest cause of crime in western society? We've got kids out on the street taking heroin and cocaine, and they're stealing to support their habits. But they're not criminals; they're victims.

It's the drugs that are to blame."

"We've talked about this at school," Alex said. The last thing he needed right now was a lecture.

"All my life I've been fighting drugs," Cray went on. "I've done advertisements for the government. I've spent millions building treatment centres. And I've written songs. You must have listened to White Lines..."

He closed his eyes and hummed softly, then sang:

"The poison's there. The poison flows It's everywhere—in heaven's name Why is it that no one knows

How to end this deadly game?"

He stopped.

"But I know how to end it," he said simply. "I've worked it out. And that's what Eagle Strike is all

about. A world without drugs. Isn't that something to dream about, Alex? Isn't that worth a few sacrifices? Think about it! The end of the drug problem. And I can make it happen."

"How?" Alex was almost afraid of the answer.

"It's easy. Governments won't do anything. The police won't do anything. No one can stop the dealers. So you have to go back to the supplies. You have to think where these drugs come from.

And where is that? I'll tell you...

"Every year, hundreds and hundreds of tons of heroin come from Afghanistan—in particular the provinces of Nangarhar and Helmand. Did you know production has increased by fourteen hundred per cent since the Taliban were defeated? So much for that particular war! Then, after Afghanistan, there's Burma and the golden triangle, with about one hundred thousand hectares of land used to produce opium and heroin. The government of Burma doesn't care. Nobody cares.

And let's not forget Pakistan, manufacturing one hundred and fifty-five metric tons of opium a year, with refineries throughout the Khyber region and along the borders.

"On the other side of the world there's Colombia. It's the leading supplier and distributor of cocaine, but it also supplies heroin and marijuana. It's a business worth three billion dollars a year, Alex. Eighty tons of cocaine every twelve months. Seven tons of heroin. A lot of it ends up on the streets of American cities. In high schools. A tidal wave of misery and crime.

"But that's only a small part of the picture." Cray held up a hand and began to tick off other countries on his fingers. "There are refineries in Albania. Mule trains in Thailand. Coca crops in Peru. Opium plantations in Egypt. Ephedrine, the chemical used in heroin production, is manufactured in China. One of the biggest drugs markets in the world can be found in Tashkent, in Uzbekistan.

"These are the principal sources of the world's drug problem. This is where the trouble all starts.

These are my targets."

"Targets..." Alex whispered the single word.

Damian Cray reached into his pocket and took out the flash drive. Yassen was suddenly alert.

Alex knew he had a gun and would use it if he so much as moved.

"Although you weren't to know it," Cray explained, "this is actually a key to unlock one of the most complicated security systems ever devised. The original key was created by the National Security Agency and it is carried by the president of the United States. My friend, the late Charlie Roper, was a senior officer with the NSA, and it was his expertise, his knowledge of the codes, that allowed me to manufacture a duplicate. Even so, it has taken enormous effort. You have no idea how much computer processing power was required to create a second key."

"The Gameslayer..." Alex said.

"Yes. It was the perfect cover. So many people; so much technology. A plant with all the processing power I could ask for. And in reality it was all for this!"

He held up the little metal capsule.

"This key will give me access to two and a half thousand nuclear missiles. These are American

missiles and they are on hair-trigger alert—meaning that they can be launched at a moment’s notice. It is my intention to override the NSA’s system and to fire twenty-five of those missiles at targets I have carefully chosen around the globe.”

Cray smiled sadly.

“It is almost impossible to imagine the devastation that will be caused by twenty-five one-hundred-ton missiles exploding at the same time. South America, Central America, Asia, Africa

... almost every continent will feel the pain. And there will be pain, Alex. I am well aware of that.

“But I will have wiped out the poppy fields. The farms and the factories. The refineries, the trade routes, the markets. There will be no more drug suppliers because there will be no more drug supplies. Of course, millions will die. But millions more will be saved.

“That is what Eagle Strike is all about, Alex. The start of a new golden age. A day when all humanity will come together and rejoice.

“That day is now. My time has finally arrived.”

EAGLE STRIKE

He swans really weren't going anywhere. They seemed happy just to circle slowly in the sunshine, occasionally dipping their beaks under the surface of the water, searching for insects, algae, whatever. Alex had been watching them for the last half-hour, almost hypnotized by them.

He wondered what it was like to be a swan. He wondered how they managed to keep their feathers so white.

He was sitting on a bench beside the Thames, just outside Richmond. This was where the river seemed to abandon London, finally leaving the city behind it on the other side of Richmond Bridge. Looking upstream, Alex could see fields and woodland, absurdly green, sprawled out in the heat of the English summer.

An au pair, pushing a pram, walked past on the towpath. She noticed Alex, and although her expression didn't change, her hands tightened on the pram and she very slightly quickened her pace. Alex knew that he looked terrible, like something out of one of those posters put out by the local council. Alex Rider, fourteen, in need of fostering. His last fight with Damian Cray had left its marks. But this time it was more than cuts and bruises. They would fade like others had faded before. This time he had seen his whole life bend out of shape.

He couldn't stop thinking about Yassen Gregorovich. Two weeks had gone by but he was still waking up in the middle of the night, reliving the final moments on Air Force One. His father had been a contract killer, murdered by the very people who had now taken over his own life. It couldn't be true. Yassen must have been lying, trying to wound Alex in revenge for what had happened between them. Alex wanted to believe it. But he had looked into the dying man's eyes and had seen no deceit, only a strange sort of tenderness—and a desire for the truth to be known.

Go to Venice. Find Scorpio. Find your destiny...

It seemed to Alex that his only destiny was to be lied to and manipulated by adults who cared nothing about him. Should he go to Venice? How would he find Scorpio? For that matter, was Scorpio a person or a place? Alex watched the swans, wishing they could give him an answer.

But they just drifted on the water, ignoring him.

A shadow fell across the bench. Alex looked up and felt a fist close tightly inside his stomach.

Mrs Jones was standing over him. The MI6 agent was dressed in grey silk trousers with a matching jacket that hung down to her knees, almost like a coat. There was a silver pin in her lapel but no other jewellery. It seemed strange for her to be out here, in the sun. He didn't want to see her. Along with Alan Blunt, she was the last person Alex wanted to see.

“May I join you?” she asked.

“It seems you already have,” Alex said.

She sat down next to him.

“Have you been following me?” Alex asked. He wondered how she had known he would be here and it occurred to him that he might have been under round-the-clock surveillance for the past fortnight. It wouldn't have surprised him.

“No. Your friend—Jack Starbright—told me you'd be here.”

“I'm meeting someone.”

“Not until twelve. Jack came in to see me, Alex. You should have reported to Liverpool Street by now. We need to debrief you.”

“There's no point reporting to Liverpool Street,” Alex said bitterly. “There's nothing there, is there? Just a bank.”

Mrs Jones understood. “That was wrong of us,” she said.

Alex turned away.

“I know you don't want to talk to me, Alex,” Mrs Jones continued. “Well, you don't have to. But will you please just listen?”

She looked anxiously at him. He said nothing. She went on.

“It's true that we didn't believe you when you came to us—and of course we were wrong. We were stupid. But it just seemed so incredible that a man like Damian Cray could be a threat to national security. He was rich and he was eccentric; nevertheless, he was only a pop star with attitude. That was what we thought.

“But if you think we ignored you completely, Alex, you're wrong. Alan and I have different ideas about you. To be honest, if it had been my choice, we'd never have got you involved in the first place ... not even in that business with the Stormbreakers. But that's not the issue here.” She took a deep breath. “After you had gone, I decided to take another look at Damian Cray. There wasn't a great deal I could do without the right authority, but I had him watched and all his movements were reported back to me.

“I heard you were at Hyde Park, in that dome when the Gameslayer was launched. I also got a police report on the woman—the journalist—who was killed. It just seemed like an unfortunate coincidence. Then I was told there had been an incident in Paris: a photographer and his assistant killed. Meanwhile Damian Cray was in Holland, and the next thing I knew, the Dutch police were screaming about some sort of high-speed chase in Amsterdam: cars and motorbikes chasing a boy on a bicycle. Of course, I knew it was you. But I still had no idea what was going on.

“And then your friend, Sabina, disappeared at Whitechurch Hospital. That really got the alarm bells ringing. I know. You're probably thinking we were absurdly slow, and you're right. But every intelligence service in the world is the same. When they act, they're efficient. But often they get started too late.

“That was the case here. By the time we came to bring you in, you were already with Cray, in Wiltshire. We spoke to your housekeeper, Jack. Then we went straight to his house. But we missed you again and this time we had no idea where you'd gone. Now we know, of course. Air Force One!

The CIA have been going crazy. Alan Blunt was called in to see the prime minister last week. It may well be that he is forced to resign.”

“Well, that breaks my heart,” Alex said.

Mrs Jones ignored this. “Alex ... what you’ve been through ... I know this has been very difficult for you. You were on your own, and that should never have happened. But the fact is, you have saved millions of lives. Whatever you’re feeling now, you have to remember that. It might even be true to say that you saved the world. God knows what the consequences would have been if Cray had succeeded. Anyway, the president of the United States would very much like to meet you. So, for that matter, would the prime minister. And for what it’s worth, you’ve even been invited to the Palace, if you want to go. Of course, nobody else knows about you.

You’re still classified. But you should be proud of yourself. What you did was ... amazing.”

“What happened to Henryk?” Alex asked. The question took Mrs Jones by surprise, but it was the only thing he didn’t know. “I just wondered,” he said.

“He’s dead,” Mrs Jones said. “He was killed when the plane crashed. He broke his neck.”

“Well, that’s that then.” Alex turned to her. “Can you go now?”

“Jack is worried about you, Alex. So am I. It may be that you need help coming to terms with what happened. Maybe some sort of therapy.”

“I don’t want therapy. I just want to be left alone.”

“All right.”

Mrs Jones stood up. She made one last attempt to read him before she left. This was the fourth occasion she had met Alex at the end of an assignment. Each time she had known that he must have been, in some way, damaged. But this time something worse had happened. She knew there was something Alex wasn’t telling her.

And then, on an impulse, she said, “You were on the plane with Yassen when he was shot. Did he say anything before he died?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did he talk to you?”

Alex looked her straight in the eye. “No. He never spoke.”

Alex watched her leave. So it was true what Yassen had said. Her last question had proved it. He knew who he was.

The son of a contract killer.

**

Sabina was waiting for him under the bridge. He knew that this was going to be a brief meeting.

There was nothing really left to say.

“How are you?” she asked.

“I’m OK. How’s your dad?”

“He’s a lot better.” She shrugged. “I think he’s going to be fine.”

“And he’s not going to change his mind?”

“No, Alex. We’re leaving.”

Sabina had told him on the phone the night before. She and her parents were leaving the country.

They wanted to be on their own, to give her father time to recover fully. They had decided it would be easier for him to begin a new life and had chosen San Francisco. Edward had been offered a job by a big newspaper there. And there was more good news. He was writing a book: the truth about Damian Cray. It was going to make him a fortune.

“When do you go?” Alex asked.

“Tuesday.” Sabina brushed something out of her eye and Alex wondered if it might have been a tear. But when she looked at him again, she was smiling. “Of course, we’ll keep in touch,” she said. “We can email. And you know you can always come out if you want a holiday.”

“As long as it’s not like the last one,” Alex said.

“It’ll be weird going to an American school...” Sabina broke off. “You were fantastic on the plane, Alex,” she said suddenly. “I couldn’t believe how brave you were. When Cray was telling you all those crazy things, you didn’t even seem scared of him.” She stopped. “Will you work for MI6 again?” she asked.

“No.”

“Do you think they’ll leave you alone?”

“I don’t know, Sabina. It was my uncle’s fault, really. He started all this years ago and now I’m stuck with it.”

“I still feel ashamed about not believing you.” Sabina sighed. “And I understand now what you must have been going through. They made me sign the Official Secrets Act. I’m not allowed to tell anyone about you.” A pause. “I’ll never forget you,” she said.

“I’ll miss you, Sabina.”

“But we’ll see each other again. You can come to California. And I’ll let you know if I’m ever in London...”

“That’s good.”

She was lying. Somehow Alex knew that this was more than goodbye, that the two of them would never see each other again. There was no reason for it. That was just the way it was going to be.

She put her arms around him and kissed him.

“Goodbye, Alex,” she said.

He watched her walk out of his life. Then he turned and followed the river, past the swans and off into the countryside. He didn't stop. Nor did he look back.

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ALEX RIDER



SCORPIA

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

New York Times *best-selling author*

Scorpia

Alex Rider [5]

Anthony Horowitz

New York : Speak, 2006. (2011)

SUMMARY:

Alex Rider, teen spy, has always been told he is the spitting image of the father he never knew. But when he learns that his father may have been an assassin for the most lethal and powerful terrorist organization in the world, Scorpia, Alex's world shatters. Now Scorpia wants him on their side. And Alex no longer has the strength to fight them. Until, that is, he learns of Scorpia's latest plot: an operation known only as "Invisible Sword" that will result in the death of thousands of people. Can Alex prevent the slaughter, or will Scorpia prove once and for all that the terror will not be stopped?

SUMMARY:

After being told that his father was an assassin for a criminal organization, fourteen-year-old Alex goes to Italy to find out more and becomes involved in a plan to kill thousands of English school children.

Chapter 1: EXTRA WORK

For the two thieves on the 200cc Vespa scooter, it was a case of the wrong victim, in the wrong place, on the wrong Sunday morning in September.

It seemed that all Life had gathered in the Piazza Esmeralda, a few miles outside Venice. Church had just finished and families were strolling together in the brilliant sunlight: grandmothers in black, boys and girls in their best suits and communion dresses. The coffee bars and ice-cream shops were open, their customers spilling onto the pavements and out into the street. A huge fountain—all naked gods and serpents—gushed jets of ice-cold water. And there was a market. Stalls had been set up selling kites, dried flowers, old postcards, clockwork birds and sacks of seed for the hundreds of pigeons that strutted around.

In the middle of all this were a dozen English schoolchildren. It was bad luck for the two thieves that one of them was Alex Rider.

It was the beginning of September. Less than a month had passed since Alex's final confrontation with Damian Cray on Air Force One—the American presidential plane. It had been the end of an adventure that had taken him to Paris and Amsterdam, and finally to the main runway at Heathrow Airport even as twenty-five nuclear missiles had been fired at targets all around the world. Alex had managed to destroy these missiles. He had been there when Cray died. And at last he had gone home with the usual collection of bruises and scratches only to find a grim-faced and determined Jack Starbright waiting for him. Jack was his housekeeper but she was also his friend, and, as always, she was worried about him.

"You can't keep this up, Alex," she said. "You're never at school. You missed half the summer term when you were at Skeleton Key and loads of the spring term when you were in Cornwall and then at that awful academy Point Blanc. If you keep this up, you'll flunk all your exams and then what will you do?"

"It's not my fault—" Alex began.

"I know it's not your fault. But it's my job to do something about it, and I've decided to hire a tutor for what's left of the summer."

"You're not serious!"

"I am serious. You've still got quite a bit of holiday left. And you can start right now."

"I don't want a tutor—" Alex started to protest.

"I'm not giving you any choice, Alex. I don't care what gadgets you've got or what smart moves you might try

—this time there's no escape!"

Alex wanted to argue with her but in his heart he knew she was right. M16 always provided him with a doctor's note to explain his long absences from school, but the teachers were more or less giving up on him. His last report had said it all: Alex continues to spend more time out of school than in it, and if this carries on, he might as well forget his GCSEs. Although he cannot be blamed for what seems to be a catalogue of medical problems, if he falls any further behind, I fear he may disappear altogether.

So that was it. Alex had stopped an insane, multimillionaire pop singer from destroying half the world—and what had he got for it? Extra work!

He started with ill grace—particularly when he discovered that the tutor Jack had found actually taught at Brookland, his own school. Alex wasn't in his class, but even so it was an embarrassment and he hoped nobody would find out. However, he had to admit that Mr Grey was good at his job. Charlie Grey was young and easy-going, arriving on a bicycle with a saddlebag crammed with books. He taught humanities but seemed to know his way round the entire syllabus.

"We've only got a few weeks," he announced. "That may not seem very much, but you'd be surprised how much you can achieve one to one. I'm going to work you seven hours a day, and on top of that I'm going to leave you with homework. By the end of the holidays you'll probably hate me. But at least you'll start the new school year on a more or less even keel."

Alex didn't hate Charlie Grey. They worked quietly and quickly, moving through the day from maths to history to science and so on. Every weekend, the teacher left behind exam papers, and gradually Alex saw his percentages improve. And then Mr Grey sprang his surprise.

"You've done really well, Alex. I wasn't going to mention this to you, but how would you like to come with me on the school trip?"

"Where are you going?"

"Well, last year it was Paris; the year before that it was Rome. We look at museums, churches, palaces ... that sort of thing. This year we're going to Venice. Do you want to come?"

Venice.

It had been in Alex's mind all along—the final minutes on the plane after Damian Cray had died. Yassen Gregorovich had been there, the Russian assassin who had cast a shadow over so much of Alex's life. Yassen had been dying, a bullet lodged in his chest. But just before the end he'd managed to blurt out a secret that had been buried for fourteen years.

Alex's parents had been killed shortly after he was born and he had been brought up by his father's brother, Ian Rider. Earlier this year, Ian Rider had died too, supposedly in a car accident. It had been the shock of Alex's life to discover that his uncle was actually a spy and had been killed on a mission in Cornwall. That was when M16

had made their appearance. Somehow they had succeeded in sucking Alex into their world, and he had been working for them ever since.

Alex knew very little about his mother and father, John and Helen Rider. In his bedroom he had a photo of them: a watchful, handsome man with

close-cut hair standing with his arm round a pretty, half-smiling woman.

He had been in the army and still looked like a soldier. She had been a nurse, working in radiology. But they were strangers to him; he couldn't remember anything about them. They had died while he was still a baby. In a plane crash. That was what he had been told.

Now he knew otherwise.

The plane crash had been as much a lie as his uncle's car accident. Yassen Gregorovich had told him the truth on Air Force One. Alex's father had been an assassin—just like Yassen. The two of them had even worked together; John Rider had once saved Yassen's life. But then his father had been killed by MI6—the very same people who had forced Alex to work for them three times, lying to him, manipulating him and finally dumping him when he was no longer needed. It was almost impossible to believe, but Yassen had offered him a way to find proof.

Go to Venice. Find Scorpia. And you will find your destiny...

Alex had to know what had happened fourteen years ago. Discovering the truth about John Rider would be the same as finding out about himself. Because, if his father really had killed people for money, what did that make him? Alex was angry, unhappy ... and confused. He had to find Scorpia, whatever it was. Scorpia would tell him what he needed to know.

A school trip to Venice couldn't have come at a better time. And Jack didn't stop him from going. In fact, she encouraged him.

"It's exactly what you need, Alex. A chance to hang out with your friends and just be an ordinary schoolboy.

I'm sure you'll have a great time."

Alex said nothing. He hated having to lie to her, but there was no way he could tell her the truth. Jack had never met his father; this wasn't her affair.

So he let her help him pack, knowing that, for him, the trip would have little to do with churches and museums.

He would use it to explore the city and see what he unearthed. Five days wasn't a long time. But it would be a start. Five days in Venice. Five days to find Scorpia.

And now here he was. In an Italian square. Three days of the trip had already gone by and he had found nothing.

"Alex—you fancy an ice cream?"

"No. I'm all right."

"I'm hot. I'm going to get one of those things you told me about. What did you call it? A granada or something..."

Alex was standing beside another fourteen-year-old boy who happened to be his closest friend at Brookland. He had been surprised to hear that Tom Harris was going to be on the trip, as Tom wasn't exactly interested in art or history. Tom wasn't interested in any school subjects and was regularly bottom in everything. But the best thing about him was that he didn't care. He was always cheerful, and even the teachers had to admit that he was fun to be with. And what Tom lacked in the classroom, he made up for on the sports field. He was captain of the school football team and Alex's main rival on sports day, beating him at hurdles, four hundred metres and the pole vault. Tom was small for his age, with spiky black hair and bright blue eyes. He wouldn't have been found dead in a museum, so why was he here? Alex soon found out. Tom's parents were going through a messy divorce, and they had packed him off to get him out of the way.

"It's a granita," Alex said. It was what he always ordered when he was in Italy: crushed ice with fresh lemon juice squeezed over it. It was halfway between an ice cream and a drink and there was nothing in the world more refreshing.

"Come on. You can order it for me. When I ask anyone for anything in Italian they just stare at me like I'm mad."

In fact, Alex only spoke a few phrases himself. Italian was one language Ian Rider hadn't taught him. Even so, he went with Tom and ordered two ices from a shop near the market stalls, one for Tom and one—Tom insisted

—for himself. Tom had plenty of money. His parents had showered him with euros before he left.

"Are you going to be at school this term?" he asked.

Alex shrugged. "Of course."

"You were hardly there last term—or the term before."

"I was ill."

Tom nodded. He was wearing Diesel light-sensitive sunglasses that he had bought at Heathrow duty-free. They were too big for his face and kept slipping down his nose. "You do realize that no one believes that," he commented.

"Why not?"

"Because nobody's that ill. It's just not possible." Tom lowered his voice. "There's a rumour you're a thief," he confided.

"What?"

"That's why you're away so much. You're in trouble with the police."

"Is that what you think?"

"No. But Miss Bedfordshire asked me about you. She knows we're mates. She said you got into trouble once for nicking a crane or something. She heard about that from someone and she thinks you're in therapy."

"Therapy?" Alex was staggered.

"Yeah. She's quite sorry for you. She thinks that's why you have to go away so much. You know, to see a shrink."

Jane Bedfordshire was the school secretary, an attractive woman in her twenties. She had come on the trip too, as she did every year. Alex could see her now on the other side of the square, talking to Mr Grey. A lot of people said there was something going on between them, but Alex guessed the rumour was probably as accurate as the one about him.

A clock chimed twelve. In half an hour they would have lunch at the hotel where they were staying. Brookland School was an ordinary west London comprehensive and they'd decided to keep costs down by staying outside Venice. Mr Grey had chosen a hotel in the little town of San Lorenzo, just ten minutes away by train. Every morning they'd arrive at the station and take the water bus into the heart of the city. But not today. This was Sunday and they had the morning off.

"So are you—" Tom began. He broke off. It had happened very quickly but both boys had seen it.

On the opposite side of the square a motorbike had surged forward. It was a 200cc Vespa Gran-turismo, almost brand new, with two men riding it. They were both dressed in jeans and loose, long-sleeved shirts. The passenger had on a visored helmet, as much to hide his identity as to protect him if they crashed. The driver—

wearing sunglasses—steered towards Miss Bedfordshire, as if he intended to run her over. But, a split second before contact, he veered away. At the same time, the man riding pillion reached out and snatched her handbag.

It was done so neatly that Alex knew the two men were professionals—scippatori as they were known in Italy.

Bag snatchers.

Some of the other pupils had seen it too. One or two were shouting and pointing, but there was nothing they could do. The bike was already accelerating away. The driver was crouched low over the handlebars; his partner was cradling the leather bag in his lap. They were speeding diagonally across the square, heading towards Alex and Tom. A few moments before, there had been people everywhere, but suddenly the centre of the square was empty and there was nothing to prevent their escape.

"Alex!" Tom shouted.

"Stay back," Alex warned. He briefly considered blocking the Vespa's path. But it was hopeless.

The driver would easily be able to swerve round him—and if he chose not to, Alex really would spend the following term in hospital. The bike was already doing about twenty miles an hour, its single-cylinder four-stroke engine carrying the two thieves effortlessly towards him. Alex certainly wasn't going to stand in its way.

He looked around him, wondering if there was something he could throw. A net? A bucket of water? But there was no net and the fountain was too far away, although there were buckets...

The bike was less than twenty metres away, accelerating all the time. Alex sprinted and snatched a bucket from the flower stall, emptied it, scattering dried flowers across the pavement, and filled it with bird seed from the stall next door. Both stall owners were shouting something at him but he ignored them. Without stopping, he swung round and hurled the seed at the Vespa just as it was about to flash past him. Tom watched—first in amazement, then with disappointment. If Alex had thought the great shower of seed would knock the two men off the bike, he'd been mistaken. They were continuing regardless.

But that hadn't been his plan.

There must have been two or three hundred pigeons in the square and all of them had seen the seed spraying out of the bucket. The two riders were covered in it. Seed had lodged in the folds of their clothes, under their collars and in the sides of their shoes. There was a small pile of it caught in the driver's crotch. Some had fallen into Miss Bedfordshire's bag; some had become trapped in the driver's hair.

For the pigeons, the bag thieves had suddenly become a meal on wheels. With a soft explosion of grey feathers, they came swooping down, diving on the two men from all directions. Suddenly the driver had a bird clinging to the side of his face, its beak hammering at his head, ripping the seed out of his hair. There was another pigeon at his throat, and a third between his legs, pecking at the most sensitive area of all. His passenger had two on his neck, another hanging off his shirt, and another half buried in the stolen bag. And more were joining in. There must have been at least twenty pigeons, flapping and batting around them, a swirling cloud of feathers, claws and—triggered by greed and excitement—flying splatters of white bird droppings.

The driver was blinded. One hand clutched the handlebars, the other tore at his face. As Alex watched, the bike performed a hundred and eighty degree turn so that now it was coming back, heading straight towards them, moving faster than ever. For a moment he stood poised, waiting to hurl himself aside. It looked as if he was going to be run over. But then the bike swerved a second time and now it was heading for the fountain, the two men barely visible in a cloud of beating wings. The front wheel hit the fountain's edge and the bike crumpled.

Both men were thrown off. The birds scattered. In the brief pause before he hit the water, the man riding pillion yelled and let go of the handbag. Almost in slow motion, the bag arced through the air. Alex took two steps and caught it.

And then it was all over. The two thieves were a tangled heap, half submerged in cold water. The Vespa was lying, buckled and broken, on the ground. Two policemen, who had arrived when it was almost too late, were hurrying towards them. The stall owners were laughing and applauding. Tom was staring. Alex went over to Miss Bedfordshire and gave her the bag.

"I think this is yours," he said.

"Alex..." Miss Bedfordshire was lost for words. "How...?"

"It was just something I picked up in therapy," Alex said.

He turned and walked back to his friend.

Chapter 2: THE WIDOW'S PALACE

Now, this building is called the Palazzo Contarini del Bovolo," Mr Grey announced. "Bovolo is the Venetian word for snail shell and, as you can see, this wonderful staircase is shaped a bit like a shell."

Tom Harris stifled a yawn. "If I see one more palace, one more museum or one more canal," he muttered, "I'm going to throw myself under a bus."

"There aren't any buses in Venice," Alex reminded him.

"A water bus, then. If it doesn't hit me, maybe I'll get lucky and drown." Tom sighed. "You know the trouble with this place? It's like a museum. A bloody great museum. I feel like I've been here half my life."

"We're leaving tomorrow."

"Not a day too soon, Alex."

Alex couldn't bring himself to agree. He had never been anywhere quite like Venice—but then there was nowhere in the world remotely like it, with its narrow streets and dark canals twisting around each other in an intricate, amazing knot. Every building seemed to compete with its neighbour to be more ornate and more spectacular. A short walk could take you across four centuries and every corner seemed to lead to another surprise. It might be a canalside market with great slabs of meat laid out on the tables and fish dripping blood onto the paving stones. Or a church, seemingly floating, surrounded by water on all four sides. A grand hotel or a tiny restaurant. Even the shops were works of art, their windows framing exotic masks, brilliantly coloured glass vases, dried pasta and antiques. It was a museum, maybe, yet one that was truly alive.

But Alex understood what Tom was feeling. After four days, even he was beginning to think he'd had enough.

Enough statues, enough churches, enough mosaics. And enough tourists all crammed together beneath a sweltering September sun. Like Tom, he was beginning to feel overcooked.

And what about Scorpia?

The trouble was, he had absolutely no idea what Yassen Gregorovich had meant by his last words. Scorpia could be a person. Alex had looked in the phone book and found no fewer than fourteen people with that name living in and around Venice. It could be a business. Or it could be a single building. Scuole were homes set up for poor people. La Scala was an opera house in Milan. But Scorpia didn't seem to be anything. No signs pointed to it—no streets were named after it.

It was only now he was here, nearing the end of the trip, that Alex began to see it had been hopeless from the start. If Yassen had told him the truth, the two men—he and John Rider—had been hired killers. Had they worked for Scorpia? If so, Scorpia would be very carefully concealed ... perhaps inside one of these old palaces. Alex looked again at the staircase that Mr Grey was describing. How was he to know that these steps didn't lead to Scorpia? Scorpia could be anywhere. It could be everywhere. And after four days in Venice, Alex was nowhere.

"We're going to walk back down the Frezzeria towards the main square," Mr Grey announced. "We can eat our sandwiches there and after lunch we'll visit St Mark's Basilica."

"Oh great!" Tom exclaimed. "Another church!"

They set off, a dozen English schoolchildren, with Mr Grey and Miss Bedfordshire in front, talking animatedly together. Alex and Tom trailed at the back, both of them gloomy. There was one day left, and, as Tom had made clear, that was one day too many. He was, as he put it, all cultured out. But he wasn't returning to London with the rest of the group. He had an older brother living in Naples and he was going to spend the last few days of the summer holidays with him. For Alex the end of the visit would mean failure. He would go home, the autumn term would begin, and...

And that was when he saw it, a flash of silver as the sun reflected off something at the edge of his vision. He turned his head. There was nothing. A canal leading away. Another canal crossing it. A single motor cruiser sliding beneath a bridge. The usual façade of ancient brown walls dotted with wooden shutters. A church dome rising above the red roof tiles. He had imagined it.

But then the cruiser began to turn, and that was when he spotted it a second time and knew it was really there: a silver scorpion decorating the side of the boat, pinned to the wooden bow. Alex stared as it swung into the second canal. It wasn't a gondola or a chugging public vaporetto, but a sleek, private launch—all polished teak, curtained windows and leather seats. There were two crew members in immaculate white jackets and shorts, one at the wheel, the other serving a drink to the only passenger. This was a woman, sitting bolt upright, looking straight ahead. Alex only had time to glimpse black hair, an upturned nose, a face with no expression.

Then the motor launch completed its turn and disappeared from sight.

A scorpion decorating a motor launch.

Scorpia.

It was the most slender of connections but suddenly Alex was determined to find out where the boat was going.

It was almost as if the silver scorpion had been sent to guide him to whatever it was he was meant to find.

And there was something else. The stillness of the woman. How was it possible to be carried through this amazing city without registering some emotion, without at least moving your head from left to right? Alex thought of Yassen Gregorovich. He would have been the same. He and this woman were two of a kind.

Alex turned to Tom. "Cover for me," he said urgently.

"What now?" Tom asked.

"Tell them I wasn't feeling well. Say I've gone back to the hotel."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll tell you later."

With that Alex was gone, ducking between an antiques shop and a café up the narrowest of alleyways, trying to follow the direction of the boat.

But almost at once, he saw that he had a problem. The city of Venice had been built on over a hundred islands.

Mr Grey had explained this on their first day. In the Middle Ages the area had been little more than a swamp.

That was why there were no roads—just waterways and oddly shaped bits of land connected by bridges. The woman was on the water; Alex was on the land. Following her would be like trying to find his way through an impossible maze in which their paths would never meet

Already he had lost her. The alleyway he had taken should have continued straight ahead. Instead it suddenly veered off at an angle, obstructed by a tall block of flats. He ran round the corner, watched by two Italian women in black dresses, sitting outside on wooden stools. There was a canal ahead of him, but it was empty. A flight of heavy stone steps led down to the murky water but there was no way forward ... unless he wanted to swim.

He peered to the left and was rewarded with a glimpse of wood and water churned up by the propellers of the motor launch as it passed a fleet of gondolas roped together beside a rotting jetty. There was the woman, still sitting in the stern, now sipping a glass of wine. The boat continued under a bridge so tiny there was barely room to pass.

There was only one thing he could do. He swiveled round and retraced his steps, running as fast as he could.

The two women noticed him again and shook their heads disapprovingly. He hadn't realized how hot it was.

The sun seemed to be trapped in the narrow streets, and even in the shadows the heat lingered. Already sweating, he burst back out onto the street where he had begun. Fortunately there was no sign of Mr Grey or the rest of the school party.

Which way?

Suddenly every street and every corner looked the same. Relying on his sense of direction, Alex chose left and sprinted past a fruit shop, a candle shop and an open-air restaurant where the waiters were already laying the tables for lunch. He came to a bend and there was the bridge—so short he could cross it in five steps. He stopped in the middle and leant over the edge, gazing down the canal. The smell of stagnant water pricked his nostrils. There was nothing. The launch had gone.

But he knew which way it had been heading. It still wasn't too late—if he could keep moving. He darted on. A Japanese tourist was just about to take a photo of his wife and daughter. Alex heard the camera shutter click as he ran between them. When they got back to Tokyo, they would have a picture of a slim, athletic boy with fair hair hanging over his forehead, dressed in shorts and a Billabong T-shirt, with sweat pouring down his face and determination in his eyes. Something to remember him by.

A crowd of tourists. A busker playing the guitar. Another café. Waiters with silver trays. Alex ploughed through them all, ignoring the shouts of protest hurled after him. Now there was no sign of water anywhere; the street seemed to go on for ever. But he knew there must be a canal somewhere ahead.

He found it. The road fell away. Grey water flowed past. He had reached the Grand Canal, the largest waterway in Venice. And there was the motor launch with the silver scorpion now fully visible. It was at least thirty metres away, surrounded by other vessels, and moving further into the distance with every second that passed.

Alex knew that if he lost it now he wouldn't find it again. There were too many channels opening up on both sides that it could take. It could slip into the private mooring of one of the palaces or stop at any of the smart hotels. He noticed a wooden platform floating on the water just ahead of him and realized it was one of the landing stages for the Venice water buses. There was a kiosk selling tickets, and a mass of people milling about.

A yellow sign gave the name of this point on the canal: SANTA MARIA DEL GIGLIO. A large, crowded boat was just pulling out. A number one bus. His school party had taken an identical boat from the main railway station the day they had arrived, and Alex knew that it travelled the full length of the canal, it was moving quickly. Already a couple of metres separated it from the landing stage.

Alex glanced back. There was no chance he would be able to find his way through the labyrinth of streets in pursuit of the motor launch. The vaporetto was his only hope. But it was too far away. He had missed it and there might not be another one for at least ten minutes. A gondola drew past, the gondolier singing in Italian to the grinning family of tourists he was carrying. For a second Alex thought about hijacking the gondola. Then he had a better idea.

He reached out and grabbed hold of the oar, snatching it out of the gondolier's hands. Taken by surprise, the gondolier shouted out, twisted round and lost his balance. The family looked on in alarm as he plunged backwards into the water. Meanwhile Alex had tested the oar. It was about five metres long, and heavy. The gondolier had been holding it vertically, using the splayed paddle end to guide his craft through the water. Alex ran. He stabbed down with the blade, thrusting it into the Grand Canal, hoping the water wouldn't be too deep.

He was lucky. The tide was low and the bottom of the canal was littered with everything from old washing machines to bicycles and wheelbarrows, cheerfully thrown in by the Venetian residents with no thought of pollution. The bottom of the oar hit something solid and Alex was able to use the length of wood to propel himself forward. It was exactly the same technique he had used pole-vaulting at Brookland sports day. For a moment he was in the air, leaning backwards, suspended over the Grand Canal. Then he swung down, sweeping through the open entrance of the water bus and landing on the deck. He dropped the oar behind him and looked around. The other passengers were staring at him in amazement. But he was on board. There were very few ticket collectors on the water buses in Venice, which was why there was nobody to challenge Alex about his

unorthodox method of arrival or demand a fare. He leant over the edge, grateful for the breeze sweeping across the water. And he hadn't lost the motor launch. It was still ahead of him, travelling away from the main lagoon and back into the heart of the city. A slender wooden bridge stretched out over the canal and Alex recognized it at once as the Bridge of the Academy, leading to the biggest art gallery in the city. He had spent a whole morning there, gazing at works by Tintoretto and Lorenzo Lotto and numerous other artists whose names all seemed to end in o. Briefly he wondered what he was doing. He had abandoned the school trip. Mr Grey and Miss Bedfordshire would probably already be on the phone to the hotel, if not the police. And why? What did he have to go on? A silver scorpion adorning a private boat. He must be out of his mind.

The vaporetto began to slow down. It was approaching the next landing stage. Alex tensed. He knew that if he waited for one load of passengers to get off and another to get on, he would never see the motor launch again.

He was on the other side of the canal now. The streets were a little less crowded here. Alex caught his breath.

He wondered how much longer he could run.

And then he saw, with a surge of relief, that the motor launch had also arrived at its destination. It was pulling into a palace a little further up, stopping behind a series of wooden poles that slanted out of the water as if, like javelins, they had been thrown there by chance. As Alex watched, two uniformed servants emerged from the palace. One moored the boat; the other held out a white-gloved hand. The woman grasped the hand and stepped ashore. She was wearing a tight-fitting cream dress with a jacket cut short above the waist. A handbag swung from her arm. She could have been a model striding off the cover of a glossy magazine. She didn't hesitate.

While the servants busied themselves unloading her suitcases, she climbed the steps and disappeared behind a stone column.

The water bus was about to leave again. Quickly Alex climbed out onto the landing stage. Once again he had to work his way round the buildings that crowded onto the Grand Canal. But this time he knew what he was looking for. A few minutes later, he found it.

It was a typical Venetian palace, pink and white, its narrow windows built into a fantastic embroidery of pillars, arches and balustrades, like something out of Romeo and Juliet. But what made the place so unforgettable was its position. It didn't just face the Grand Canal. It sank right into it, the water lapping against the brickwork.

The woman from the boat had gone through some sort of portcullis, as if entering a castle. But it was a castle that was floating. Or sinking. It was impossible to say where the water ended and the palace began.

The palace did at least have one side that could be reached by land. It backed onto a wide square with trees and bushes planted in ornamental tubs. There were men—servants—everywhere, setting up rope barriers, positioning oil-burning torches and unrolling a red carpet. Carpenters were at work, constructing what looked like a small bandstand. More men were carrying a variety of crates and boxes into the palace. Alex saw champagne bottles, fireworks, different sorts of food. They were obviously preparing for a serious party.

Alex stopped one of them. "Excuse me," he said. "Can you tell me who lives here?"

The man spoke no English. He didn't even try to be friendly. Alex asked a second man, but with exactly the same result. He recognized the type: he had met men like them before. The guards at Point Blanc Academy. The technicians at Cray Software Technology. These were people who worked for someone who made them nervous. They were paid to do a job and they never stepped out of line. Were they people with something to hide? Perhaps.

Alex left the square and walked round the side of the palace. A second canal ran the full length of the building and this time he was luckier. There was an elderly woman in a black dress with a white apron sweeping the towpath. He went up to her.

"Do you speak English?" he asked. "Can you help me?"

"Si, con piacere, mio piccolo amico." The woman nodded. She put the broom down. "I spend many year in London. I speak good English. Who can I do?"

Alex pointed at the building. "What is this place?"

"It is the Ca' Vedova." She tried to explain. "Ca' ... you know ... in Venice we say casa. It means palace. And vedova?" She searched for the word. "It is the Palace of the Widow. Ca' Vedova."

"What's going on?"

"There is a big party tonight. For a birthday. Masks and costumes. Many important people come."

"Whose birthday?"

The woman hesitated. Alex was asking too many questions and he could see that she was becoming suspicious.

But once again age was on his side. He was only fourteen. What did it matter if he was curious? "Signora Rothman. She is very rich lady. The owner of the house."

"Rothman? Like the cigarette?" But the woman's mouth had suddenly closed and there was fear in her eyes.

Alex looked round and saw one of the men from the square standing at the corner, watching him. He realized he had overstayed his welcome—and no one had been that pleased to see him in the first place.

He decided to have one last try. "I'm looking for Scorpia," he said.

The old woman stared at him as if she had been slapped in the face. She picked up the broom and her eyes darted over to the man watching them. It was lucky he hadn't heard the exchange. He had sensed something was wrong, but he hadn't moved. Even so, Alex knew it was time to go.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Thank you for your help."

He made his way quickly up the canal. Yet another bridge loomed ahead of him and he crossed it. Although he didn't know exactly why, he was grateful to leave the Widow's Palace behind him.

As soon as he was out of sight, he stopped and considered what he had learnt. A boat with a silver scorpion had led him to a palace, which was owned by a beautiful and wealthy woman who didn't smile. The palace was protected by a number of mean-looking men, and the moment he had mentioned the name Scorpia to a cleaning lady, he had suddenly become as welcome as the plague.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was enough. There was going to be a masked ball tonight, a birthday party.

Important people had been invited. Alex wasn't one of them, but already he had decided. He planned to be there all the same.

Chapter 3: INVISIBLE SWORD

The full name of the woman who had entered the palazzo was Julia Charlotte Glenys Rothman. This was her home—or one of them, anyway. She also had a flat in New York, a mews house in London and a villa overlooking the Caribbean Sea and the white sands of Turtle Bay on the island of Tobago.

She walked along a softly lit corridor that ran the full length of the building from the jetty at one end to a private lift at the other, her high heels clicking on the terracotta tiles. There was not one servant in sight. She reached out and pressed the lift button, the white silk of her glove briefly touching silver, and the door opened.

It was a small lift, barely big enough for one person. But she lived alone. The servants used the stairs.

The lift took her to the third floor and opened directly onto a modern conference room with no carpet, no pictures on the walls, no ornamentation of any sort. Stranger still, although it should have offered some of the most beautiful views in the world, the room had been built without a single window. But if no one could look out, nor could anyone look in. It was safer that way. The lighting came from halogen lamps built into the walls, and the only furniture in the room was a long glass table surrounded by leather chairs. There was a door opposite the lift but it was locked. Two guards were standing on the other side, armed and ready to kill anyone who so much as approached in the next half-hour.

There were eight men waiting for her around the table. One was in his seventies, bald and wheezy with sore eyes, wearing a crumpled grey suit. The man sitting next to him was Chinese, while the man opposite, fair-haired, wearing an open-necked shirt, was from Australia. It was clear that the people congregated in this place came from many different parts of the world, but they had one thing in common: a stillness, a coldness even, that made the room as cheerful as a morgue. Not one of them greeted Mrs Rothman as she took her seat at the head of the table. Nor did they bother looking at the time. If she had arrived, it must be exactly one o'clock.

That was when the meeting was meant to begin.

“Good afternoon,” Mrs Rothman said.

A few heads nodded but nobody spoke. Greetings were a waste of words.

The nine people sitting around the table on the third floor of the Widow's Palace made up the executive board of one of the most ruthless and successful criminal organizations in the world. The old man's name was Max Grendel; the Chinese man was Dr Three. The Australian had no name at all. They had come to this room without windows to go over the final details of an operation that would, in just a few weeks, make them richer by the sum of one hundred million pounds.

The organization was called Scorpia.

It was a fanciful name, they all knew it, invented by someone who had probably read too much James Bond.

But they had to call themselves something, and in the end they had chosen a name drawn from their four main fields of activity.

Sabotage. Corruption. Intelligence. Assassination.

Scorpia. A name which worked in a surprising number of languages and which rolled off the tongue of anyone who might wish to employ them. Scorpia. Seven letters that were now on the database of every police force and security agency in the world.

The organization was formed in the early eighties, during the so-called Cold War, the secret war that had been fought for decades between the Soviet Union, China, America and Europe. Every government in the world had its own army of spies and assassins, all of them prepared to kill or to die for their country. What they weren't prepared for, though, was to find themselves out of work; and twelve of them, seeing that the Cold War would soon be over, realized that was exactly what they would be. They wouldn't be needed any more. It was time to go into business for themselves.

They came together one Sunday morning in Paris. Their first meeting took place at the Maison Berthillon, a famous ice-cream parlour on the Ile St-Louis, not far from Notre-Dame. They were all acquainted: they had tried to kill each other often enough. But now, in the pretty, wood-panelled room with its antique mirrors and lace curtains, and over twelve dishes of Berthillon's famous wild strawberry ice cream, they discussed how they might work together and make themselves rich. At this meeting, Scorpia was born.

Since then it had flourished. Scorpia was all over the world. It had brought down two governments and arranged for a third to be unfairly elected. It had destroyed dozens of businesses, corrupted politicians and civil servants, engineered several major ecological disasters, and killed anyone who got in its way. It was now responsible for a tenth of the world's terrorism, which it undertook on a contract basis. Scorpia liked to think of itself as the IBM of crime—but in fact, compared to Scorpia, IBM was strictly small-time.

Of the original twelve, only nine were left. One had died of cancer; two had been murdered. But that wasn't a bad record after twenty years of violent crime. There had never been a single leader of Scorpia. All nine were equal partners but one executive was always assigned to each new project, working in alphabetical order.

The project they were discussing this afternoon had been given a code name: Invisible Sword. Julia Rothman was in command.

“I would like to report to the board that everything is progressing on schedule,” she announced.

There was a trace of a Welsh accent in her voice. She had been born in Aberystwyth. Her parents had been Welsh nationalists, burning down the cottages of English holidaymakers who had bought them as second homes. Unfortunately they had torched one of these cottages with the English family still inside it, and when Julia was six she found herself in an institution while her parents began a life sentence in jail. This was, in a way, the start of her own criminal career.

"It is now three months," she went on, "since we were approached by our client, a gentleman in the Middle East. To call him rich would be an understatement. He is a multi-billionaire. This man has looked at the world, at the balance of power, and he has decided that something has gone seriously wrong. He has asked us to remedy it.

"In a nutshell, our client believes that the West has become too powerful. He looks at Great Britain and America. It was the friendship between them that won the Second World War. And it is this same friendship that now allows the West to invade any country that it pleases and to take anything it wants. Our client has asked us to end the British-American alliance once and for all.

"What can I tell you about our client?" Mrs Rothman smiled sweetly. "Perhaps he is a visionary, interested only in world peace; perhaps he is completely insane. Either way, it makes no difference to us. He has offered us an enormous sum of money—one hundred million pounds to be exact—to do what he wants. To humble Britain and America and to ensure they cease to work together as a world power. And I am happy to be able to tell you that twenty million pounds, the first installment of that money, arrived in our Swiss bank account yesterday. We are now ready to move into phase two."

There was silence in the room. As the men waited for Mrs Rothman to speak again, the faint hum of an air conditioner could be heard. But no sound came from outside.

"Phase two—the final phase—will take place in under three weeks from now. I can promise you that very soon the British and the Americans will be at one another's throats. More than that: by the end of the month both countries will be on their knees. America will be hated throughout the entire world; the British will have witnessed a horror beyond anything they could ever have imagined. We will all be a great deal richer. And our friend from the Middle East will consider his money well spent."

"Excuse me, Mrs Rothman. I have a question..."

Dr Three bowed his head politely. His face seemed to be made of wax and his hair—jet black—looked twenty years younger than the rest of him. It had to be dyed. He was very small and might have been a retired teacher.

He might have been many things, but he was, in fact, the world expert on torture and pain. He had written several books on the subject.

"How many people do you intend to kill?" he asked.

Julia Rothman considered. "It's still difficult to be precise, Dr Three," she replied. "But it will certainly be thousands. Many thousands."

"And they will all be children?"

"Yes. They will mainly be twelve and thirteen years old." She sighed. "It is, it goes without saying, very unfortunate. I adore children, even though I'm glad I never had any of my own. But that's the plan. And I have to say, the psychological effect of so many young people dying will, I think, be useful. Does it concern you?"

"Not at all, Mrs Rothman." Dr Three shook his head.

"Does anyone have any objections?"

Nobody spoke, but out of the corner of her eye, Mrs Rothman noticed Max Grendel shift uncomfortably on his chair at the far end of the table. At seventy-three, he was the oldest man there, with sagging skin and liver spots on his forehead. He suffered from an eye disease that made him weep constantly. He was dabbing at his eyes now with a tissue. It was hard to believe that he had been a commander in the German secret police and had once personally strangled a foreign spy during a performance of Beethoven's Fifth.

"Are preparations complete in London?" the Australian asked.

"Construction in the church finished a week ago. The platform, the gas cylinders and the rest of the machinery will be delivered later today."

"Will Invisible Sword work?"

It was typical of Levi Kroll to be blunt and to the point. He had joined Scorpia from Mossad, the Israeli secret service, and still thought of himself as a soldier. For twenty years he had slept with an FN 9mm pistol under his pillow. Then, one night, it had gone off. He was a large man with a beard that covered most of his face, concealing the worst of his injuries. An eyepatch hid the empty socket where his left eye had once been.

"Of course it will work," Mrs Rothman snapped.

"It's been tested?"

"We're testing it right now. But I have to tell you that Dr Liebermann is something of a genius. A boring man if you have to spend time with him—and heaven knows I've had to do plenty of that. But he's created a brand-new weapon and the beauty of it is, all the experts in the world won't know what it is or how it operates. Of course, they'll work it out in the end, and I've made plans for that eventuality. But by then it will be too late.

The streets of London will be littered with corpses. It'll be the worst thing to happen to children in a city since the Pied Piper."

"And what about Liebermann?" Dr Three asked.

"I haven't decided yet. We'll probably have to kill him too. He invented Invisible Sword but he has no idea how we plan to use it. I expect he'll object. So he'll have to go."

Mrs Rothman looked around. "Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Yes." Max Grendel spread his hands across the surface of the table. Mrs Rothman wasn't surprised that he had something to say. He was a father and a grandfather. Worse than that, in his old age he had become sentimental.

"I have been with Scorpia from the very beginning," he said. "I still remember our first meeting in Paris. I have earned many millions working with you and I've enjoyed everything we've done. But this project... Invisible Sword. Are we really going to kill so many children? How will we be able to live

with ourselves?”

“Rather more comfortably than before,” Julia Rothman muttered.

“No, no, Julia.” Grendel shook his head. A single tear trickled from one of his diseased eyes. “This will come as no surprise to you. We spoke of this the last time we met. But I have decided that enough is enough. I’m an old man. I want to retire to my castle in Vienna. Invisible Sword will be your greatest achievement, I am sure. But I no longer have the heart for it. It is time for me to step down. You must go ahead without me.”

“You can’t retire!” Levi Kroll protested sharply.

“Why did you not tell us about this earlier?” another of the men asked angrily. He was black but with Japanese eyes. There was a diamond the size of a pea embedded in one of his front teeth.

“I told Mrs Rothman,” Max Grendel said reasonably. “She’s the project leader. I felt there was no need to inform the entire board.”

“We really don’t need to argue about this, Mr Mikato,” Julia Rothman said smoothly. “Max has been talking about retiring for a long time now and I think we should respect his wishes. It’s certainly a shame. But, as my late husband used to say, all good things come to an end.”

Mrs Rothman’s multimillionaire husband had fallen to his death from a seventeenth-storey window. It had happened just two days after their marriage.

“It’s very sad, Max,” she continued. “But I’m sure you’re doing the right thing. It’s time for you to go.”

She went with him down to the jetty. The motor launch had left but there was a gondola waiting to take him back down the canal. They walked slowly arm in arm.

“I’ll miss you,” she said.

“Thank you, Julia.” Max Grendel patted her arm. “I’ll miss you too.”

“I don’t know how we’ll manage without you.”

“Invisible Sword cannot fail. Not with you at the helm.”

She stopped suddenly. “I almost forgot,” she exclaimed. “I have something for you.” She snapped her fingers and a servant ran forward carrying a large box wrapped in pink and blue paper, tied with a silver bow. “It’s a present for you,” she said.

“A retirement present?”

“Something to remember us by.”

Max Grendel had stopped beside the gondola. It was bobbing up and down on the choppy surface. A gondolier dressed in a traditional striped jersey stood in the back, leaning on his oar. “Thank you, my dear,” he said. “And good luck.”

“Enjoy yourself, Max. Keep in touch.”

She kissed him, her lips lightly touching his withered cheek. Then she helped him into the gondola. He sat down awkwardly, placing the brightly coloured box on his knees. At once the gondolier pulled away. Mrs Rothman raised a hand. The little boat cut swiftly through the grey water.

Mrs Rothman turned and went back into the Widow’s Palace.

Max Grendel watched her sadly. He knew that life wouldn’t be the same without Scorpia. For two decades he had devoted all his energies to the organization. It had kept him young, kept him alive. But now there were his grandchildren to consider. He thought of the twins, little Hans and Rudi. They were twelve years old. The same age as Scorpia’s targets in London. He couldn’t be part of it. He had made the right decision.

He had almost forgotten the package resting on his knees. That was typical of Julia. Perhaps it was because she was the only woman on the executive board, but she had always been the one who was most emotional. He wondered what she had bought him. The parcel was heavy. On an impulse, he untied the ribbon, then ripped off the paper.

It was an executive briefcase, obviously expensive. He could tell from the quality of the leather, the hand-stitching ... and there was the label. It had been made by Gucci. His initials—MUG—had been engraved in gold just under the handle. With a smile he opened it.

And screamed as the contents spilled over him.

Scorpions. Dozens of them. They were at least ten centimetres long, dark brown with tiny pincers and fat, swollen bodies. As they poured into his lap and began to swarm up his shirt, he recognized what they were: hairy thick-tailed scorpions from the Parabuthus species, one of the most deadly in the world.

Max Grendel fell backwards, shrieking, his eyes bulging, arms and legs flailing as the hideous creatures found the gaps in his clothes and crawled inside his shirt and down under the waistband of his trousers. The first one stung him on the side of his neck. Then he was being stung over and over again, jerking helplessly, the screams dying in his throat.

His heart gave out long before the neurotoxins killed him. As the gondola floated gently on, being steered now towards the island cemetery of Venice, tourists might have noticed an old man lying still with his hands spread wide, gazing with sightless eyes at the bright Venetian sky.

Chapter 4: BY INVITATION ONLY

That night, the Widow's Palace slipped back three hundred years in time.

It was an extraordinary sight. The oil-burning torches had been lit and the flames cast flickering shadows across the square. The servants had changed into eighteenth-century costumes with wigs, tightly fitting stockings, pointed shoes and waistcoats. A string quartet played beneath the night sky, sitting on the bandstand that Alex had seen being constructed that afternoon. The stars were out in their thousands and there was even a full moon.

It was as if whoever had organized the party had managed to control the weather too.

Guests were arriving by water and on foot. They too were in costume, wearing elaborate hats and richly coloured velvet cloaks that swept the ground. Some carried ebony walking sticks; others had swords and daggers. But not a single face could be seen among the crowd making its way to the front door. Features were concealed behind white masks and gold masks, masks encrusted with jewels and masks surrounded by huge plumes of feathers. It was impossible to know who had been invited to Mrs Rothman's party—but not just anyone could walk in. The Grand Canal entrance to the palace was closed and everyone was being directed to the main door that Alex had seen earlier that day. Four security guards wearing the bright red tunics of Venetian courtiers were positioned there, checking each invitation.

Alex watched all this from the other side of the square. He was crouched behind one of the miniature trees with Tom, the two of them outside the pool of light thrown by the torches. It hadn't been easy to persuade Tom to come. Alex's disappearance before lunch had been noticed almost immediately, and Tom had been left to make up an unconvincing story about a stomach ache in front of an angry Mr Grey. Alex should have been in serious trouble when he finally met up with the group back at the hotel, and if it hadn't been for Miss Bedfordshire—

who was still grateful to him for recovering her handbag—he would have been grounded for the night. Anyway, this was Alex. Everyone knew they could rely on him to act oddly.

But to disappear again! It was the last evening of the trip and the group had been given two hours' free time which they were meant to spend in San Lorenzo, in the cafes or the square. Alex had other plans. He had found everything he needed in Venice that afternoon before he went back to the hotel. But he knew he couldn't do this alone. Tom had to come too.

"Alex, I can't believe you're doing this," Tom whispered now. "Why is this party such a big deal anyway?"

"I can't explain."

"Why not? I don't understand you sometimes. We're meant to be friends but you never tell me anything."

Alex sighed. He was used to this. When he thought of all the things that had happened to him in the last six months, the way he had been dragged into the world of espionage, a web of secrecy and lies, this was the worst part. MI6 had turned him into a spy. And at the same time they had made it impossible for him to be what he wanted—an ordinary schoolboy. He had been juggling two lives, one day saving the world from a nuclear holocaust, the next struggling with his chemistry homework. Two lives, but he had ended up trapped between them. He didn't know where he belonged any more. There was Tom, there was Jack Starbright and there was Sabina Pleasure—although she had now moved to America. Apart from them, he had no real friends. It wasn't his choice, but somehow he had ended up alone.

Alex made up his mind. "All right," he said. "If you'll help me, I'll tell you everything. But not yet."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"I'm going to Naples tomorrow to stay with my brother."

"Before you go."

Tom considered. "I'll help you anyway, Alex," he said. "Because that's what friends are for. And if you really do want to tell me, you can save it until we're back at school. OK?"

Alex nodded and smiled. "Thanks."

He reached behind him for the sports bag he had brought with him from the hotel. Inside it were the various items he had bought that afternoon. Quickly he stripped off his shorts and T-shirt, then pulled on a pair of loose-fitting silk trousers and a velvet waistcoat that left his arms and chest bare. Next he took out a tub of what looked like jelly, except that it was coloured gold. Body paint. He scooped some out and rubbed it between his palms, then smeared it over his arms, neck and face. He signalled to Tom, who grimaced and then finished his shoulders. All his visible skin was now gold.

Finally he brought out gold sandals, a white turban with a single mauve feather, and a plain half-mask, just big enough to cover his eyes. He had asked the costume shop to supply him with everything he would need to become a Turkish slave. He hoped the overall effect didn't make him look as ridiculous as he felt.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Tom nodded, wiping his hands on his trousers. "You know, you do look a bit sad," he muttered.

"I don't care ... so long as it works."

"I think you're completely mad."

Alex watched as more people arrived at the palace. If his plan was going to work, he had to choose the right moment. He also had to wait for the right guests. They were still coming thick and fast, milling around the main entrance while the guards checked their invitations. He glanced over at the canal. A water taxi had just pulled in and a couple were climbing out, a man in a frock coat and a woman in a black cloak that trailed behind her.

Both were masked. They were perfect.

He nodded to Tom. "Now."

"Good luck, Alex." Tom took something out of the sports bag and darted forward, making no attempt to avoid being seen. Seconds later Alex stole round the edge of the square, keeping to the shadows.

There was a snarl-up at the entrance. A guard was holding an invitation and questioning one of the guests. That was helpful too. Alex needed as much confusion as possible. Tom must have seen that this was the right moment, because suddenly there was a loud bang and all heads turned to see a boy capering in the square, laughing and shouting. He had just let off a firework and, with everyone watching, he lit another.

"Come stai?" he shouted. How are you? "Quanto tempo a vuole per andare a Roma?" How long does it take to get to Rome? Alex had picked the phrases out of a guidebook. They were the only Italian Tom had been able to learn.

Tom threw the second firework and there was another bang. At the same time, Alex hurried down to the canal just as the two guests climbed the steps to the square. His sandals flapped on the paving stones as he ran, but nobody noticed him. They were all staring at Tom, who was singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" at the top of his voice. Alex bent down and picked up the train of the woman's cloak. As she headed towards the main entrance he walked behind her, holding the material off the ground.

It worked exactly as he had hoped. The crowd quickly tired of the mad English boy who was making a fool of himself. One of the guards had already been sent to deal with him. Out of the corner of his eye, Alex saw Tom turn and run away. The couple reached the door and the man in the frock coat handed over their invitation. A guard glanced at the new arrivals and ushered them through. He had assumed that Alex was with the guests; they had brought a Turkish boy with them as part of their disguise. Meanwhile, the guests had assumed that Alex worked in the palace and had been sent to escort them in. Why else would he have appeared?

The three of them passed through the door and into a grand reception hall with a domed, mosaic-covered ceiling, white columns and a marble floor. A pair of double-height glass doors opened onto a courtyard with a fountain surrounded by ornamental shrubs and flowers. At least a hundred guests were gathered there, chatting, laughing and drinking champagne from crystal glasses. It was obvious they were all pleased to be there.

Servants, dressed identically to the ones outside, circulated with silver trays of food. A man sitting at a harpsichord played Mozart and Vivaldi. In keeping with the atmosphere, all the electric lights had been turned off, but there were beacons mounted on the walls as well as dozens of oil lamps, their flames bowing and dancing in the evening breeze.

Alex had followed his lord and lady into the courtyard but now he dropped the cloak and slipped away to one side. He looked up. The palace rose three floors above him, connected by a spiralling staircase like the one he had seen at the Palazzo Contarini del Bovolo. The first floor opened onto a gallery with yet more arches and columns, and some of the guests had made their way up there and were strolling slowly together, gazing down on the crowds below. Looking around him, Alex found it hard to believe that it really was the twenty-first century. A perfect illusion had been created within the palace walls.

Now that he was here, he was unsure what to do. Had he really found Scorpia? How could he be sure? It occurred to him that if Yassen Gregorovich had been telling the truth and his father had once worked for these people, they might be happy to meet him. He would ask them what had happened, how his father had died, and they would tell him. He had no need to creep around in disguise.

But suppose he was wrong? He remembered the look of fear on the old woman's face when he had mentioned the name Scorpia. And then there were the hard-eyed men working outside the palace. They spoke no English and Alex doubted he would be able to explain what he was doing if they caught him. By the time someone had laid their hands on an English dictionary, he might find himself floating face down in the canal.

No. He had to find out more before he made his move. Who was this woman—Mrs Rothman? What was she doing here? It seemed incredible to Alex that a grand masked ball in a Venetian palace could in any way be connected to a murder that had taken place fourteen years ago.

The notes of the harpsichord rang out. The conversation was getting louder as more and more people arrived.

Most of them had removed their masks—it was impossible otherwise to eat or drink—and Alex saw that this was truly an international gathering. The guests were mainly speaking in Italian but there were many black and Asian faces among the crowd. He caught sight of a short Chinese man deep in discussion with another man who had a diamond set into one of his front teeth. A woman he thought he knew crossed the courtyard in front of him, and with a start he recognized her as one of the most famous film actresses in the world. Now that he looked around he saw that the place was packed with Hollywood stars. Why had they been invited? Then he remembered. This was the beginning of September, the time of the Venice International Film Festival. Well, that told him something about Mrs Rothman if she had the clout to invite celebrities like these.

Alex knew he mustn't linger too long. He was the only teenager in the palace and it would only be a matter of time before someone noticed him. He was horribly exposed. His arms and shoulders were bare. The silk trousers were so thin he could hardly feel them on him. The Turkish disguise might have enabled him to get in, but it was awkward and unhelpful now that he was actually here. He decided to make a move. There was no sign of Mrs Rothman on the ground floor. She was the person he most wanted to see. Perhaps he would find her somewhere upstairs.

He made his way through the party-goers and climbed the spiral staircase. He reached the gallery and saw a series of doors leading off into the palace itself. It was less crowded here and a few people glanced curiously at him as he proceeded.

Alex knew that the important thing was not to hesitate. If he allowed himself to be challenged, he would soon be thrown out. He went through a door and found himself in an area that was a cross between a very wide corridor and a room in its own right. A gold-framed mirror hung on one wall above an ornate antique table, on which was a large vase of flowers. A huge wardrobe stood opposite. Apart from this, the area was empty.

There was a door at the far end and Alex was about to continue towards it, when he heard muffled voices approaching. He looked around for somewhere to hide. There was only the wardrobe. He didn't have time to slip inside, but he slid against the wall next to it. Like the courtyard, this floor was lit by oil lamps. He hoped the bulk of the wardrobe would cast a large enough shadow to conceal him.

The door opened. Two people came out, talking in English: one a man, the other a woman.

"We have received the release certificates and the batch will be on its way the day after tomorrow." The man was speaking. "As I explained to you, Mrs Rothman, timing is everything."

"The cold chain."

"Exactly. The cold chain cannot be broken. The boxes will be flown to England. After that..."

"Thank you, Dr Liebermann. You have done very well."

The two of them had stopped, just out of sight from where Alex was hiding. However, leaning forward slightly, he could see their reflections in the mirror.

Mrs Rothman was stunning. There was no other way for Alex to describe her. She was more like a film star than any of the actresses he had seen downstairs, her long black hair falling in waves to her shoulders. She had a mask, but it was in her hand, on the end of a wooden rod, so he was able to see her face: the brilliant dark eyes, the blood-red lips, the perfect teeth. She was wearing a fantastic dress made of ivory-coloured lace, and somehow Alex knew that it wasn't a costume but a real antique. A gold necklace set with dark blue sapphires circled her throat.

Her companion was also wearing fancy dress—a long, fur-lined cloak, a wide-brimmed hat and leather gloves.

He too was holding a mask but it was an ugly thing with small eyes and a long beak. He had come as a traditional plague doctor and, Alex thought, he hardly needed the disguise. His face was pale and lifeless, his lips flecked with saliva. He was very tall, towering over Mrs Rothman. Yet still, somehow, she dwarfed him.

Alex wondered why he had been invited.

"You do promise me, Mrs Rothman," Dr Liebermann said, taking off a pair of heavy glasses and wiping them nervously. "Nobody is going to get hurt."

"Does it really matter?" she replied. "You're being paid five million euros. A small fortune. Think about it, Dr Liebermann. You're set up for life."

Alex risked another glance and saw the woman standing side-on, waiting for the man to speak. Dr Liebermann was frozen. Caught between greed and fear.

"I don't know," he rasped. "Perhaps if you were paying me more..."

"Then maybe we'll have to think about doing just that!" Mrs Rothman sounded completely relaxed. "But let's not spoil the party by talking about business. I'm coming down to Amalfi myself in two days' time. I want to be there when the batch leaves, and we can talk about money then." She smiled. "Right now, let's go and have a glass of champagne and I can introduce you to some of my famous friends."

They had started walking again and as they talked they went past Alex. For a moment he was tempted to show himself. This was the woman he had come to find. He should approach her before she disappeared into the crowd. But at the same time he was intrigued. Release certificates and cold chains. He wondered what they had been talking about. Once again he decided it would be better to find out a little more before he revealed himself.

He stepped out into the corridor and went down to the door through which Mrs Rothman and her companion had come. He opened it and found himself in a huge room—and one that could truly be called palatial. It must have been at least thirty metres long, with a row of floor-to-ceiling windows that gave wonderful views over the Grand Canal. The floor was polished wood but almost everything else was white. There was a massive fireplace made of white marble with a pale tiger-skin rug (Alex winced; he could think of nothing more disgusting) spread out in front of it. White bookshelves lined the far wall, filled with leather-bound books, and, next to a second door, Alex saw a white antique table on which lay what looked like a remote control device for a TV. In the centre of the room stood a solid walnut desk. Mrs Rothman's? Alex went over to it.

The surface was bare apart from a white leather blotting pad and a tray with two silver fountain pens. Alex imagined Mrs Rothman sitting here. It was the sort of desk a judge or a company chairman would have, a desk designed to impress. He looked around quickly, checking there were no security cameras, then tried one of the drawers. It was unlocked but it contained only writing paper and envelopes. He tried the next drawer down.

Surprisingly, that one opened too and this time he found himself looking at some sort of brochure with a yellow cover and a name printed in black: CONSANTO ENTERPRISES

He opened the brochure. On the first page was a picture of a building. It was obviously high-tech, long and angular with walls made entirely of reflective glass. There was an address at the bottom: Via Nuova, Amalfi.

Amalfi. That was the place Mrs Rothman had mentioned a few moments earlier.

He flicked over to another page. There were photos of various men and women in suits and white coats. The staff of Consanto, perhaps? One of them—in the middle of the top row—was Harold Liebermann. His name was printed underneath but the text was in Italian. Alex wouldn't be able to learn anything from it. He closed the brochure and tried another drawer.

Something moved.

Alex had been sure he was alone. He had been surprised that there was no sign of any security in the room, particularly if this was Mrs Rothman's study. But he was suddenly aware that something had changed. It took him a few seconds to realize what it was, and at once he felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle.

What he had taken to be a tiger-skin rug had just stood up.

It was a tiger, alive and angry.

A Siberian tiger. How did he know it was Siberian? The colour, of course. The stripes were more white and gold than orange and black, and there weren't so many as usual. As the creature turned its gaze on him, weighing him up, Alex tried to remember what he knew about this rarest of species. There were fewer than five hundred Siberian tigers left in the wild, with only slightly more in captivity. It was the largest living cat in the world. And ... yes! It had retractable claws. That was a very useful piece of information to consider as the animal prepared to tear him apart.

Because Alex had no doubt that that was exactly what was about to happen. The tiger seemed to have awoken from a deep sleep but its yellow eyes were now fixed on him and he could almost hear the messages being sent to the brain. Food. That was another thing, he remembered now. A Siberian tiger could eat one hundred pounds of meat in a single sitting. By the time this one finished with him, there wouldn't be a great deal left.

Alex's mind was in a whirl. What exactly had he stumbled on in the Widow's Palace? What sort of woman didn't bother with locks and security cameras but kept a live tiger by her desk? The creature stretched. Alex saw the perfect muscles rippling beneath the thick fur. He tried to move but found that he couldn't. He wondered what had happened to him, then realized. He was terrified. Rooted to the spot. He was just steps away from a predator that had, for centuries, inspired dread across the world. It was almost beyond belief that this animal should have found itself imprisoned in a Venetian palace. But it was here. That was all that mattered.

And whatever the surroundings, the carnage would be the same.

The tiger growled. It was a low, rumbling noise, more terrible than anything Alex had ever heard. He tried to find the strength to move, to put a barrier between them. But there was nothing.

The tiger took a stride forward. It was preparing to spring. Its eyes had darkened. Its jaw hung open, revealing two lines of white, dagger-sharp teeth. It growled a second time, louder and more continuous.

Then it leapt.

Chapter 5: FLOOD TIDE

Alex did the only thing he could. Faced with five hundred pounds of snarling tiger hurtling towards him, he fell to his knees, slid along the wooden floor and disappeared under the desk. The tiger landed above him. He could sense its bulk, separated from him only by the surface of the desk—and he could hear its claws gouging into the wood. Two things went through his mind. The first was the sheer improbability of coming face to face with a live tiger. The second was the knowledge that, if he didn't find a way out of the room fast, this might be the last thought he would ever have.

He had a choice of two doors. The one he had come in through was the closest. The tiger was half on the floor, half on the desk, momentarily confused. In the forest it would have found him at once, but this world was alien to it. Alex seized his chance and scrambled forward. It was only when he was out in the open, away from the scant protection of the desk, that he realized he wasn't going to make it.

The tiger was watching him. Alex had twisted round, his hands behind him, his legs bent sideways, in the act of standing up. The tiger's front paws were resting on the desk. Neither of them moved. Alex knew that the door was too far away. There was nowhere else to hide. A surge of anger flooded through him. He should never have come in here. He should have been more careful.

The tiger roared. A deep, rattling blast of air that made every nerve tingle. It was, quite simply, the sound of terror.

And then the second door opened and a man came in.

All Alex's attention was fixed on the tiger, but he noticed that the man wasn't wearing a costume. He was dressed in a polo-neck jersey, jeans and trainers; the clothes looked quietly, confidently expensive. And from the way they clung to the muscles in his arms and chest, Alex could see that he was extremely fit. He was young, in his mid-twenties. And he was black.

But there was something wrong.

The man turned his head and Alex saw that one side of his face was covered in strange white blotches, as if he had been involved in some sort of chemical accident or perhaps a fire. Then Alex noticed his hands. They too were different colours. The man should have been handsome. But in fact he was just a mess.

The man took in the scene instantly. He saw that the tiger was about to pounce. Without a second thought he reached out and picked up the remote control that Alex had noticed on the table. He pointed it vaguely in the direction of the tiger and pressed a button.

And then the impossible happened. The tiger climbed off the desk. Alex saw its eyes begin to dim, and it slumped down on the floor. Alex stared. The tiger had been transformed, in seconds, from a dreadful monster to nothing more than an oversized pussy cat. And then it was asleep, its chest rising and falling, its eyes closed.

How had it worked?

Alex looked back at the man who had just come in. He was still holding the device, whatever it was, in his hand. For a moment Alex wondered if the animal was even real. Could it possibly be some sort of robot that could be switched on and off by remote control? No. That was ridiculous. He had been close enough to the tiger to notice every detail. He had smelt its breath. He could see it now, twitching, as it returned to the forests it had come from ... in its dreams. It was a living thing. But somehow it had been turned off as quickly and as easily as a light bulb. Alex had never felt more out of his depth. He had followed a boat with a silver scorpion, and it had led him into some sort of Italian wonderland.

"Chi sei? Cosa fai qui?"

The man was talking to him. Alex didn't understand the words but he got the gist. Who are you? What are you doing here? He stood up, wishing that he had been able to change out of his costume. He felt half naked and horribly vulnerable. He wondered if Tom was still waiting for him outside. No. He had told him to go back to the hotel.

The man spoke to him a second time. Alex had no choice.

"I don't speak Italian," he said.

"You're English?" The man switched effortlessly into Alex's language.

"Yes."

"What are you doing in Mrs Rothman's study?"

"My name is Alex Rider—"

"And my name is Nile. But that's not what I asked you."

"I'm looking for Scorpia."

The man—Nile—smiled, showing perfect teeth. With the tiger neutralized, Alex was able to examine him more closely. Without the skin problem, he would be classically handsome. He was clean-shaven, elegant, in perfect physical shape. His hair was cut close to his skull, with a pattern of curving lines shaved around his ears.

Although he looked relaxed, Alex knew that he was already in a combat stance, poised on the balls of his feet.

This was a dangerous man; he radiated self-confidence and control. He wasn't alarmed to find a teenager here in the study. Instead he seemed to be amused.

“What do you know about Scorpia?” the man asked. His voice was soft and very precise.

Alex said nothing.

“It’s a name you overheard downstairs,” Nile said. “Or perhaps you found it in the desk. Were you searching the desk? Is that why you’re here? Are you a thief?”

“No.”

Alex had already decided he’d had enough. Any minute now, someone else would arrive. It was time to go. He turned away and began to move towards the door he had first come in.

“If you take one more step, I’m afraid I’ll have to kill you,” Nile warned.

Alex didn’t pause.

He heard the light footfall on the wooden floor behind him and timed it exactly right. At the last moment, he stopped and swivelled round, lashing out with his heel in a back kick that should have driven into the man’s abdomen, winding him at the very least, and possibly knocking him out. But with a sense of shock Alex felt his foot meet only empty air. Nile had either anticipated what he was about to do or twisted away with unbelievable speed.

Alex turned full circle, trying to follow through with a front jab—the kizami-zuki—he had learnt in karate. But it was too late. Nile had dodged again and there was a blur of movement as the edge of his hand scythed down.

It was like being hit by a block of wood. Alex was almost thrown off his feet. The whole room shuddered and went dark. Desperately he tried to adopt a defensive position, crossing his arms, keeping his head low. Nile had been expecting it. Alex felt an arm close around his throat. A hand pressed against his head. With a single twist, Nile could now break his neck.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Nile said, talking as if to a little child. “I did warn you and you didn’t listen. So now you’re dead.”

There was a moment of blinding pain, a flash of white light. Then nothing.

Alex came round with the feeling that his head had been wrenched off. Even after he had opened his eyes it took a few seconds for his vision to return. He tried to move a hand and was relieved to see his fingers curl inwards. So his neck wasn’t broken. He tried to play back what had happened. Nile must have let go of his head at the last moment and used an elbow strike. Alex had been knocked out before but he had never woken up in as much pain as this. Had Nile meant to kill him? Somehow he doubted it. Even from their short encounter, Alex knew that he had met a master of unarmed combat, someone who knew exactly what he was doing and didn’t make mistakes.

Nile had knocked Alex out and dragged him here. Where was he? With his head still pounding, Alex gazed around him. He didn’t like the look of what he saw. He was in a small chamber, somewhere underneath the palace, he guessed. The walls were made of mottled plaster and the way they sloped reminded him of a cellar.

The floor had recently been flooded. He was standing on a sort of trellis-work of damp and rotting wooden planks. The room was lit by a single bulb behind a dirty glass covering. There were no windows. Alex shivered.

It was cold in here, despite the earlier heat of the September evening. And there was something else. He ran a finger along one of the walls and felt a coating of slime. He had thought the cellar was painted a dirty shade of green, but now he realized that the flooding had risen further than the floor. It had continued all the way up to the ceiling. Even the light bulb had at some stage been underwater.

As his senses slowly returned, Alex became aware of the smell of water in the air and recognized the stench of the rotting vegetables, mud and salt of the Venice canal system. He could even hear water. It was lapping not on the other side of the wall but somewhere beneath him. He knelt down and examined the floor. One of the boards was loose and he was able to swivel it enough to make a narrow opening. He stretched a hand through and touched water. There was no way out. He turned round. A short flight of wooden steps led up to a solid-looking door. He went up to it and pressed his weight against it. The door was covered in slime too. There was no give in it at all.

What now?

Alex was still dressed in the silk trousers and waistcoat that had been his costume. There was nothing to protect him against the dank chill. He thought briefly about Tom, and that gave him a little comfort. If he hadn’t returned to the hotel by the morning, Tom would surely raise the alarm. Daybreak couldn’t be far away. Alex had no idea how long he’d been unconscious, and he had taken off his watch when he put on his disguise, something he was now regretting. There was no sound on the other side of the door. It seemed he had no choice but to wait.

He crouched in a corner, wrapping his arms around himself. Most of the gold paint had come off, and he felt ragged and dirty. He wondered what Scorpia would do with him. Surely someone—Nile or Mrs Rothman—

would come down, if only to find out why he had bothered to break in.

Incredibly, he managed to fall asleep. The next thing he knew, he had jerked awake with a crick in his neck. A cold numbness had spread through his body. Some sort of siren had woken him. He could hear it howling—not inside the building but far away. At the same time, he was aware that something in the room had changed. He glanced down and saw water spreading across the floor.

For a second he was puzzled. Had a pipe burst? Where was the water coming from? Then his thoughts came together and he understood his fate. Scorpia wasn’t interested in him. Nile had told him he was going to die and he had meant what he said.

The siren was warning that there was going to be a flood. Venice has an alarm system in place all year round.

The city stands at sea level and because of the wind and the atmospheric pressure, there are frequent storm surges. These cause water from the Adriatic to pour into the Venice lagoon, with the result that the canals break their banks and whole streets and squares simply disappear for several hours. Cold black water was bubbling up into the room even now. How high would it go? Alex didn’t need to ask. The stains on the walls went all the

way up to the ceiling. The water would rise over him and he would struggle helplessly, unable to save himself, until he drowned. Eventually the level would fall again and they would clear out his body, perhaps dumping it in the lagoon.

He leapt to his feet and ran to the door, slamming his hands against it. He was shouting too, although he knew it was hopeless. Nobody came. Nobody cared. He surely wasn't the first to end up locked in here. Ask too many questions, go into rooms where you had no right to be, and this was the result.

The water was rising steadily. It must have been five centimetres deep already. The floor had disappeared.

There were no windows, and the door was rock solid. There was only one possible way out of here and Alex was almost too afraid to try it. But one of the planks was loose. Maybe there was some sort of well or large pipe underneath. After all, he reasoned, there had to be some way for the water to come in.

And it was gushing in now, more quickly than ever. Alex hurried back down the stairs. The water level was well over his ankles, almost reaching his knees. He made a quick calculation. At this rate, the room would be completely submerged in about three minutes. He ripped off the waistcoat and threw it aside. He wouldn't need that now. He waded forward, searching with his feet for the loose plank. He remembered that it was somewhere in the middle and soon found it, stubbing his toe against one side of the opening. He knelt down, the water now circling his waist. He wasn't even sure he could squeeze through. And if he did, what would he find on the other side?

He tried to feel with his hands. There was an upsurge of water right beneath him. This was the source of the inflow. The water was coming directly up from some sort of opening. So this had to be the way out. The only question was—could he do it? He would have to force himself, head first, through the tiny gap, find the opening and swim into it. If he got stuck he would drown upside down. If the passage was blocked he would never make it back again. He was kneeling in front of the worst death imaginable. And the water was creeping up his spine, pitiless and cold.

Bitter anger shivered through him. Was this the destiny that Yassen Gregorovich had promised him? Had he come to Venice simply for this? The sirens were still howling. The water had covered the first two steps and was already lapping at the third. Alex cursed, then took several deep breaths, hyperventilating. When he had forced as much air into his lungs as he thought they could take, he toppled over and plunged head first through the hole.

The gap was barely big enough. He felt the edge of the wooden floorboards bite into his shoulders, but then he was able to use his hands to propel himself onward. He was utterly blind. Even if he had opened his eyes, the water would have been black. He could feel it pressing against his nostrils and lips. It was ice cold and stinking.

God! What a way to die. His stomach had passed through the opening but his hips were stuck. Alex twisted like a snake and the lower part of his body came free.

He was already running out of air. He wanted to turn and go back, but now fresh panic gripped him as he realized that he was trapped inside some sort of tube with no room to go any way except down. His shoulders banged against solid brick. He kicked out with one leg and was rewarded with a stab of pain as his foot hit the wall that enclosed him. He felt the current swirling round his face and neck—ropes of water that wanted to bind him for ever in this black death. He became aware of the full horror of his situation now that there was no escape from it. No adult would have been able to get this far. It was only because he was smaller that he had been able to make his way into this well shaft or whatever it was. But there was no room for manoeuvre. The walls were already touching him on every side. If the tube became any narrower, he would be stuck fast.

He forced himself on. Forward and down, his hands groping ahead of him, dreading the metal bars that would tell him Nile had been laughing at him from the start. His lungs were straining; the pressure was hammering at his chest. He tried not to panic, knowing it would only use up his air more quickly, but already his brain was screaming at him to stop, to breathe in, to give up and accept his fate. Forward and down. He could hold his breath for two minutes. And it couldn't have been more than a minute since he had taken the plunge. Don't give in! Just keep moving...

By now he must be ten or fifteen metres under the cellar floor. He reached out and whimpered as his knuckles struck brick. A few precious bubbles of air escaped between his lips and chased up his body, past his flailing legs. At first he thought he had come to a dead end. He opened his eyes for a split second. It made no difference at all. Open or closed, there was nothing to see: he was in pitch darkness. His heart seemed to stop beating. In that moment, Alex experienced what it would be like to die.

But then his other hand felt the curve of the wall and he realized that at last the well shaft was bending. He had reached the bottom of an elongated J and somehow he had to get round the turn. Perhaps this was where it finally joined the canal. As it twisted, it tightened. As if the swirling water wasn't enough, Alex felt the brickwork close in on him, scratching his legs and chest. He knew he had very little air left. His lungs were straining and there was a giddy emptiness in his head. He was about to slide into unconsciousness. Well, that would come as a blessing. Maybe he would never feel the water rushing into his mouth and down his throat.

Maybe he would be asleep before the end.

He turned the corner. His hands hit something—bars of some sort—and he was able to pull his legs round. Only then did he discover that his worst fears had been realized. He had come to the end of the well shaft but there was a metal barrier, a circular gate. He was holding it. There was no way out.

Perhaps it was the sense of having come so far, of being cheated at the end, that gave him strength. Alex pushed and the metal hinges, weakened by the rust of three hundred years, shattered. The gate opened. Alex swam through. His shoulders came clear and he knew that there was nothing above him except water. He kicked out and felt the broken edge of the gate cut into his thigh. But there was no pain. Just a surge of desperation, a need for this to be over.

He was facing up. He could see nothing but he trusted to his natural buoyancy to take him the right way. He felt bubbles tickling his cheeks and eyelids and knew that, without wanting to, he was releasing the last of his breath. How far down had he gone? Did he have enough air left to reach the surface? He kicked as hard as he could, scrabbling with his hands—doing the crawl, only vertically. Once again he opened his eyes, hoping to see light ... moonlight, lanterns ... anything. And maybe there was a glimmer, a white ribbon flickering across his vision.

Alex screamed. Bubbles exploded from his lips. And then the scream itself erupted as he broke through the surface into the dawn light. For a moment his arms and shoulders were clear of the water and he took a huge gulp of air, then fell back. Water splashed all around him. Lying on his

back, cushioned by the water, he breathed again. Rivulets of water streamed down his face. Alex knew they were mixed with tears.

He looked around him.

He guessed it was about six o'clock in the morning. The siren was still sounding but there was nobody about.

And that was just as well. Alex was floating in the middle of the Grand Canal. He could see the Bridge of the Academy, a vague shape in the half-light. The moon was still in the sky, but the sun was already stealing up behind the silent churches and palaces, casting a faint light across the lagoon.

Alex was so cold that he could no longer feel anything. He was aware only of the deathly grip of the canal, trying to drag him down. With the last of his strength he swam across to a flight of uneven stone steps on the far side of the Grand Canal, away from the Widow's Palace. Whatever happened, he never wanted to go near that place again.

He was naked from the waist up. He had lost his sandals and his trousers were in tatters. Blood was running down one leg, mingling with the filthy canal water. He was soaked. He had no money and his hotel was a train ride away, outside Venice. But Alex didn't care. He was alive.

He took one look back. There was the palace, dark and silent. The party had long ago come to an end.

Slowly he limped away.

Chapter 6: THOUGHTS ON A TRAIN

Tom Harris sat back in the second-class carriage of the pendolino—the fast train from Venice to Naples—and looked out of the window as the buildings and fields slipped by. He was thinking about Alex Rider.

Alex's absence had, of course, been noticed the night before. Mr Grey had assumed he was late getting back to the hotel, but when his bed was still empty at half past ten, the alarm buttons had been pressed. Mr Grey had alerted the police and then telephoned Alex's guardian—an American woman called Jack Starbright—in London. Everyone at Brookland knew that Alex had no parents; it was one of the many things that made him different. It was Jack who had calmed the situation down.

"You know what Alex is like. Sometimes he lets his curiosity get the better of him. I'm glad you called, but I'm sure he'll show up. You really don't need to worry."

But Tom was worried. He had seen Alex swallowed up by the crowd at the Widow's Palace and knew it was something more than curiosity that had led his friend there. He didn't know what to do. Part of him wanted to tell Mr Grey what the two of them had done. Alex might still be in the palace. He might need help. But another part of him was afraid of getting into trouble ... and perhaps getting Alex into even more trouble than he was in already. In the end he decided to keep silent. They were leaving the hotel at half past ten the next morning. If by that time there was still no news from Alex, he would come forward and tell them where he was.

In fact, Alex rang the hotel at half past seven. He was, he said, on his way to England. He had got homesick and had decided to leave early. Mr Grey took the call.

"Alex," he said. "I can't believe you've done this. I'm meant to be responsible for you. When I brought you on this trip, I trusted you. You've completely let me down."

"I'm sorry, sir." Alex sounded wretched and that was how he felt.

"That's not good enough. Because of you, I may not be allowed to take other kids on future trips. You're spoiling it for everyone."

"I didn't mean this to happen," Alex said. "There are things you don't understand. When I see you next term, I'll try to explain it to you ... as much as I can. I really am sorry, sir. And I'm grateful to you for the way you've helped me this summer. But you don't have to worry about me. I'll be all right."

There were a lot of things Mr Grey wanted to say but he stopped himself. He had got to know Alex well in all their hours together and liked him. He also knew that Alex was like no other boy he'd ever met. He didn't believe for a minute that Alex was homesick. Nor did he think he was on his way back to England. But sometimes, just occasionally, it was better not to ask.

"Good luck, Alex," he said. "Look after yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

The rest of the school party had been told that Alex had already left. Miss Bedfordshire had packed his bags for him, and everyone else had been too busy sorting out their own things to think about him any more. Only Tom knew that Alex was lying. They had been sharing a room in the hotel, and Alex's passport was still on the bedside table. Acting on impulse, Tom had taken it with him. He had given Alex his brother's address in Naples. There was still a chance he might show up there.

The scenery flashed past, as uninteresting as scenery nearly always becomes when seen through the grimy window of a train. Tom had parted company with the school party outside the hotel. They were flying back to England. He had a ticket to Naples, where his brother would be waiting to meet him. He had about six hours to kill. There was a Game Boy in his backpack and a book—Northern Lights. Tom didn't much like reading but everyone in his class had been told they had to get through at least one novel during the summer holidays.

There were just a few days left until the start of term and he was only on page seven.

He wondered what had happened to Alex. And why had Alex been so determined to break into the Widow's Palace in the first place? As the train rattled on, leaving the outskirts of Venice behind, Tom thought about his friend. They had met two years ago. Tom—who was about half the size of anyone else in his year—had just been beaten up. This was something that seemed to happen to him quite often. In this case it was a bunch of sixteen-year-olds led by a boy called Michael Cook who had suggested he should use his lunch money to buy them cigarettes. Tom had politely refused and a short while later Alex had come across him sitting on the pavement, picking up his tattered books and wiping blood from his nose.

"You OK?"

"Yeah. I've got a broken nose. I've lost my lunch money. And they've told me they're going to do it all again tomorrow. But otherwise I'm fine."

"Mike Cook?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I should have a word with him."

"What makes you think he'll listen to you?"

"I've got a way with words."

Alex had met the bully and two of his friends behind the bike shed the following day. It was a short meeting but Michael Cook never bothered anyone else again. It was also noticed that, for the following week, he limped and spoke in a strangely high-pitched voice.

That was the start of a close friendship. Tom and Alex lived near each other and often cycled home together.

They were in lots of teams together—despite his size, Tom was extremely quick on his feet. When Tom's parents started talking about divorce, Alex was the only person he told.

In return, Tom probably knew more about Alex than anyone at Brookland. He had visited his house a few times and had met Jack, the cheerful, red-haired American girl who wasn't exactly his nanny or housekeeper but seemed to be looking after him. Alex had no parents. Everyone knew that Alex had lived with his uncle—who must have been rich, judging from the house. But then he had died in a car accident. It had been announced in school assembly and Tom had gone round to the house a couple of times, hoping to find Alex, but he had never been in.

After that, Alex had changed. It had started with his first long absence from school in the spring term, and everyone assumed that he must have been knocked off balance by his uncle's death. But then he had disappeared again in the summer term. There was no explanation. Nobody seemed to have any idea where he went. When the two of them had finally met again, Tom had been surprised how much his friend had changed.

He had been hurt. Tom had seen some of the scars. But Alex also seemed to have got a lot older. There was something in his eyes that hadn't been there before, as if he had seen things he would never be able to forget.

And now this business in Venice! Maybe Miss Bedfordshire was right after all, and Alex really did need to see a shrink. Tom reached for his Game Boy, hoping to put the whole thing out of his mind. He knew he ought to continue with the book, and he promised himself he would go back to it in two or three hundred miles' time ...

after they had gone through Rome.

He became aware that someone was standing over him, and automatically fumbled for his ticket. He looked up and gaped. It was Alex.

He was dressed in old-fashioned jeans and a baggy jersey, both one size too big. He was dirty; his hair was matted and untidy. Tom glanced down and saw that he was barefoot. He looked worn out.

"Alex?" Tom was almost too shocked to speak.

"Hi." Alex gestured to an empty seat. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"No. Sit down..." Tom had a whole table to himself—which was just as well. The other passengers were staring at Alex in horror. "How did you get here? What happened? Where did you get those clothes?" Suddenly the questions were tumbling out.

"I'm afraid I stole the clothes," Alex confessed. "I nicked them off a washing line. I couldn't get any shoes, though."

"What happened to you last night? I saw you go into the palace. Did they find you?" Tom wrinkled his nose.

"Did you fall in a canal or something?"

Alex was too tired to answer any of his questions. "I've got a favour to ask you, Tom," he said.

"Do you want me to hide you from the police?"

"I need to borrow some money. I couldn't buy a ticket. And I'm going to have to get some new clothes."

"That's OK. I've got plenty of money."

"And I need to stay with you—with your brother—for a while. Is that going to be all right?"

"Sure. Jerry won't mind. Alex..."

But Alex had slumped forward, his head cradled in his hands. He was sound asleep.

The train picked up speed, curving round the Gulf of Venice and continuing its journey south.

When Alex woke up, the train was still travelling through the Italian countryside. He slowly uncurled himself.

Already he was feeling better. The train hadn't just left Venice behind, it had carried him away from his experiences of the night before. He sat up and saw Tom staring at him. A sandwich, a bag of crisps and a Coke sat on the table between them.

"I thought you'd be hungry," Tom said.

"I'm starving. Thanks." Alex opened the can of Coke. It was lukewarm, but he didn't mind. "Where are we?"

he asked.

"We went through Rome about an hour ago. I think we'll be there quite soon." Tom waited while Alex drank.

He put his book down. "You look terrible," he commented. "Are you going to tell me what happened last night?"

"Sure." Alex had decided before he even got on the train that he was going to have to tell Tom everything. It wasn't just that he needed Tom's help. He was tired of lying. "But I'm not sure you're going to believe it," he added.

"Well, I've been reading my book for the last two and a half hours," Tom said, "and I'm only on page nineteen.

So I think I'd prefer listening to you, whatever you've got to say."

"All right..."

Alex had only ever told one other person the truth about himself, and that had been his friend Sabina Pleasure.

She hadn't believed him—not until she'd found herself knocked out and tied up in the basement of the country mansion owned by the insane multimillionaire Damian Cray. Now Alex told Tom everything he had told her, starting with the truth behind the death of his uncle and continuing all the way up to his escape from the flooded chamber the night before. The strange thing was that he enjoyed telling his story. He wasn't boasting about being a spy and working for secret intelligence. Quite the opposite. For too long he had been a servant of MI6, forced by them to keep quiet about everything he had done. They had even made him sign the Official Secrets Act. By telling the truth, he was doing exactly what they didn't want him to do and it came as a relief, a great weight off his shoulders. It made him feel that he was the one in control.

"...I couldn't go back to the hotel. Not without money. Not without shoes. But I knew you were taking the train to Naples, so I walked up to the station and waited for you. I followed you onto the train. And here I am."

Alex finished and waited nervously for Tom's response. Tom had said nothing for the last twenty minutes.

Would he, like Sabina, walk out on him?

Tom nodded slowly. "Well, that makes sense," he said at last.

Alex stared. "You believe me?"

"I can't think of any other reason to explain everything that's happened. Missing so much school. And all those injuries. I mean, I thought your housekeeper might be beating you up, but that didn't seem likely. So, yes. You must be a spy. But that's pretty heavy, Alex. I'm glad it's you, not me."

Alex couldn't help smiling. "Tom, you really are my best mate."

"I'm happy to help. But there's one thing you haven't told me. Why were you interested in Scorpia in the first place? And what are you doing now, coming to Naples?"

Alex hadn't mentioned his father. That was the one area that still troubled him. It was too private to share with anyone. "I've got to find Scorpia," he began. He paused, then continued carefully. "I think my dad may have had some sort of involvement with them. I never knew him. He died shortly after I was born."

"Did they kill him?"

"No. It's difficult to explain. I just want to find out about him. I've never met anyone who knew him. Even my uncle never talked much about him. I just have to know who he was."

"And Naples?"

"I heard Mrs Rothman talking about a company in Amalfi. That's not too far from Naples. I think it's called Consanto. I saw the name in a sort of brochure in her desk, and the person she was talking to had his photograph inside. She said she'd be there in two days. That's tomorrow. I'd be interested to know why."

"But, Alex..." Tom frowned. "You met this black guy, Nile..."

"Actually, he wasn't exactly black. He was more sort of ... black and white."

"Well, the moment you mentioned Scorpia, he locked you in a cellar and tried to drown you. Why go back? I mean, it sounds to me like they're not that keen to meet you."

"I know." Alex couldn't deny that Tom was right. And he had learnt very little about Mrs Rothman. He couldn't even be certain that she was connected to Scorpia. The one thing he did know was that she—or the people who worked for her—was utterly ruthless. But he couldn't leave it. Not yet. Yassen Gregorovich had shown him a path. He had to follow it to the end. "I just want to take a look, that's all."

Tom shrugged. "Well, I suppose you can't be in any worse trouble than you are with Mr Grey. When you get back to school, I think he's going to murder you."

"Yeah. I know. He didn't sound too happy on the phone."

There was a brief silence. The train rushed through a station, a blur of neon and concrete, without stopping.

"It must mean a lot to you," Tom said. "Finding out about your dad."

"Yes. It does."

"My mum and dad have been shouting at each other for ages. All they ever do is fight. Now they're splitting up and they're fighting about that. I don't care about either of them any more. I don't think I even like them." For a brief moment Tom looked sadder than Alex had ever seen him. "So I think I understand what you're saying, and I hope you find out something good about your dad, because right now I can't think of anything good about mine."

Jerry Harris, Tom's elder brother, met them at the station and took them by taxi to his flat. He was twenty-two years old and had come to Italy on his gap year but had somehow forgotten to return. Alex liked him immediately. Jerry was totally laid-back, thin to the point of scrawny, with bleached hair and a lopsided smile.

It made no difference to him that Alex had turned up uninvited, and he didn't comment on Alex's appearance or the fact that he seemed to have made the journey from Venice without shoes.

He lived in the Spanish Quarter of the city. It was a typical Naples street: narrow, with buildings five or six storeys high on both sides and washing lines strung out between them. Looking up, Alex saw a fantastic patchwork of crumbling plaster, wooden shutters, ornate railings, window boxes and terraces with Italian women leaning out to chat with their neighbours. Jerry was renting a top-floor flat. There was no lift. The three of them

climbed a twisting staircase with a different smell and sound on each floor: disinfectant and a baby crying on the first, pasta and a violin playing on the second...

"This is it," Jerry announced, unlocking a door. "Make yourselves at home."

Home was an open-plan space with hardly any furniture, white painted walls, a wooden floor and views over the city. There was a kitchen in the corner, every surface piled high with dirty plates, and a door leading to a small bedroom and bathroom. Somehow, someone had dragged a battered leather three-seater sofa all the way up. It sat in the middle of the room surrounded by a tangle of sports equipment, only some of which Alex recognized. There were two skateboards, ropes and pitons, an oversized kite, a mono-ski and what looked like a parachute. Tom had already told Alex that his brother was into extreme sports. He was teaching English as a foreign language in Naples, but only to pay for his trips mountaineering, surfing or whatever.

"You two hungry?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah." Tom slumped down on the sofa. "We've been on a train for, like, six hours. You got any food?"

"You've got to be kidding! No. We'll go out and get a pizza or something. How's things, Tom? How are Mum and Dad?"

"The same."

"As bad as that?" Jerry turned to Alex. "Our parents are complete crap. I'm sure my brother's told you. I mean, calling him Tom and me Jerry. How crap can you get?" He shrugged. "What are you doing down here, Alex?"

You want to visit the coast?"

On the train Alex had impressed on Tom the importance of not repeating anything he'd said. Now he winced as Tom announced, "Alex is a spy."

"Is he?"

"Yeah. He works for MI6."

"Wow. That's awesome."

"Thanks." Alex wasn't sure what to say.

"So what are you doing in Naples, Alex?"

Tom answered for him. "He wants to find out about a company. Constanza."

"Consanto," Alex said.

"Consanto Enterprises?" Jerry opened the fridge and took out a beer. Alex noticed that, apart from beer, there was nothing else in the fridge. "I know about them. I used to have one of their people learning English. He was a research chemist or something. I hope he was a better chemist than he was a linguist, because his English was awful."

"Who are Consanto?" Alex asked.

"They're one of these big pharmaceutical companies. They make drugs and biological stuff. They've got a plant near Amalfi."

"Can you get me in?" Alex was hopeful.

"You've got to be kidding. I doubt the pope could get in. I drove past once and it's this really high-tech sort of place. It looks like something out of a sci-fi film. And it's got all these fences and security cameras and stuff."

"They must have something to hide," Tom said.

"Of course they've got something to hide, you dimwit," Jerry muttered. "All these drugs companies are coming up with new patents and they're worth a fortune. I mean, like, if someone discovers a cure for AIDS or something, it would be worth billions. That's why you can't get in. The guy I was teaching never said anything about his work. He wasn't allowed to."

"Like Alex."

"What?"

"Being a spy. He's not allowed to say anything about that either."

"Right." Jerry nodded.

Alex looked from one to the other. Despite the fact that there were eight years between them, the two brothers were obviously close. He wished he could spend more time with them. He felt more relaxed now than he had in a long time. But that wasn't why he was here. "Can you take me to Amalfi?" he asked.

"Sure." Jerry shrugged and finished his beer. "I haven't got any lessons tomorrow. Would that be OK?"

"It would be great."

"It's not that far from Naples. I can borrow my girlfriend's car and drive you down there. You can see Consanto for yourself. But I'm telling you now, Alex, there's definitely no way in."

Chapter 7: CONSANTO

Standing beside the car, in the full heat of the mid-morning sun, Alex had to admit that Jerry Harris was right.

Consanto had certainly done everything it possibly could to protect whatever it was hiding.

There was a single main building, rectangular in shape and at least fifty metres long. Alex had seen the picture in the brochure and he was struck by how much the actual building resembled it—as if the photograph had been blown up a thousand times, cut out, and somehow made to stand up. It wasn't quite real. Alex was looking at a wall of reflective glass. Even the sunlight couldn't seem to find a way in. It was a huge silver block with a single sign—CONSANTO—cut out of solid steel.

Jerry was standing next to him, dressed in knee-length shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt. He had brought along a pair of binoculars and Alex examined the wide concrete steps that led up to the main entrance. There were a few outlying buildings, warehouses and ventilation plants, and a car park with about a hundred cars. He trained the binoculars on the roof of the main complex. He could see two water tanks, a row of solar panels and, next to them, a brick tower with a single, open door. A fire escape? If he could reach it, he might just find a way in.

But it was obvious that he could get nowhere near. The entire site was surrounded by a fence more than six metres high and topped with razor wire. A single track led to a checkpoint, with a second one right behind it.

Every car that went in and out was searched. And, just to be sure, cameras mounted on steel poles swivelled and rotated, the lenses sweeping over every centimetre of ground. Even a fly trying to get in would have been noticed. And swatted, Alex thought gloomily.

Consanto Enterprises had chosen this position carefully. Amalfi, the busy, densely populated Mediterranean port, was a few miles to the south, and there were a few isolated villages to the north. The complex was in a sort of hole, a flat and rocky stretch of landscape with few trees or buildings—nowhere to hide. Alex was standing with the sea about half a mile behind him. There were sailing boats dotted about and a single ferry ploughed through the water on its way to the island of Capri. His overwhelming impression was that it would be impossible to approach Consanto from any direction without being spotted. He was probably being filmed even now.

“You see what I mean?” Jerry said.

Tom had his back to the buildings; he was looking at the sea. “Anyone fancy a swim?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Jerry nodded slowly. “You bring any trunks?”

“No.”

“It doesn't matter. We can swim in our underpants.”

“I'm not wearing underpants.”

Jerry glanced at his brother. “You are so gross!”

Alex watched as a supply van made its way past the first control post. It really did look impossible. Even if he managed to sneak into a car or a truck, he would be found when it was searched. There was no point waiting until nightfall. There were dozens of arc lamps arranged around the perimeter and they would flick on the minute it grew dark. He could see uniformed guards patrolling the grounds with German shepherd dogs on leashes. They would probably be there all night too.

He was about to give up. He couldn't get in from the front or the sides; he couldn't climb the fence. He looked past the complex. It had been set against a sheer cliff. The rock face rose at least three hundred metres and he noticed a cluster of buildings, far away, at the summit.

He pointed. “What's that?” he asked.

Jerry followed the direction of Alex's finger. “I don't know.” He thought for a moment. “It's probably Ravello.

It's a hilltop village.”

“Can we go there?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Alex put it all together in an instant. The flat roof with the fire escape, seemingly open. The village perched high up on the cliff. The equipment he had seen in Jerry's flat in Naples. Suddenly it was very simple.

Consanto Enterprises might look impregnable. But Alex had found a way in.

The faded eighteenth-century villa stood some distance away from Ravello, reached by a path that twisted along the side of the mountain, high above the pine trees. It was a wonderful place to escape to, lost in its own world, far away from the crowds on the beaches and in the streets below. A cool evening breeze drifted in from the sea and the light had turned from a blue to a mauve to a deep red as the sun slowly set. There was an ornamental garden with a long avenue running down the centre and, at the far end, a terrace that appeared unexpectedly with white marble heads mounted on the parapet. Beyond the terrace, there was nothing. The garden simply came to an abrupt end with a sheer drop straight down to the coastal road, the Consanto complex and the rocky flatlands three-hundred-odd metres below.

The tourists had long ago left for the evening. The villa was about to close. Alex stood on his own, thinking about what he had to do. His mouth was dry and there was an unpleasant churning in his stomach. This was madness. There had to be another solution. No. He had examined all the

possibilities. This was the only way.

He knew that BASE jumping was one of the most dangerous of all extreme sports, and that every BASE jumper would know someone who had been injured or killed. BASE stands for Building, Antenna, Span and Earth. It means, essentially, parachuting without the use of an aircraft. BASE jumpers will throw themselves off skyscrapers, dams, rock faces and bridges. The jumps themselves aren't against the law, but they're usually done without permission, often in the middle of the night. Trespassing, being outside the system, is all part of the fun.

They had driven all the way back to Naples to get the equipment which Jerry Harris had agreed to lend to Alex.

Jerry had used the long journey to give Alex as much information about the techniques and the potential dangers as he could. A crash course, Tom had muttered gloomily. Just what Alex didn't need.

"The first and most important rule is the one that beginners find hardest," Jerry said. "When you jump, you've got to wait as long as possible before you release the canopy. The longer you wait, the further you travel away from the side of the cliff. And you must keep your shoulders level. The last thing you need is a one eighty onto a hard-core object."

"What's that in English?" Alex asked.

"It's what occurs when you get an off-heading opening. Basically, it means you go the wrong way and hit the cliff."

"And what happens then?"

"Yeah. Well... you die."

Alex was wearing a helmet, knee pads and elbow pads. Jerry had also lent him a pair of sturdy hiking boots.

But that was all. He would need to react instantly as he fell through the sky, and too much protective gear would only slow him down. Besides, as Jerry had pointed out, nobody had ever made a BASE jump without basic training. If something went wrong, all the protective clothes in the world wouldn't do him one bit of good.

And the difference between life and death?

For Alex it boiled down to two hundred and twenty square feet of Fill nylon. Skydivers need on average one square foot of parachute for every pound of their body weight and equipment. But BASE jumpers need almost half that again. Alex's chute had been designed for Jerry, who was heavier than he was. He would have plenty of material.

He was carrying a seven-cell Blackjack canopy which Jerry had bought second hand for a little under one thousand American dollars. An ordinary parachute normally contains nine cells—nine separate pockets. The larger BASE canopy is thought to be more docile, easier to fly and land accurately. Alex's own weight would drag it out of the deployment bag as he fell, and it would inflate over his head, taking the shape of an aerofoil, the ram-air design of all modern parachutes.

Jerry stood next to him, pointing a black gadget about the size and shape of a pair of binoculars at the ground.

He was taking a reading. "Three hundred and fifty-seven metres," he said. He took out a laminated card—an altitude delay planner—and quickly consulted it. "You can do a four," he said. "It'll give you approximately fifteen seconds under canopy. A six max. But that'll mean landing almost at once."

Alex understood what he was saying. He could free-fall for between four and six seconds. The less time he spent dangling underneath the parachute, the less chance he would have of being spotted from below. On the other hand, the faster he arrived, the more chance he would have of breaking most of his bones.

"And when you get down there, remember..."

"Flaring."

"Yes. If you don't want to break both your legs, you have to slow yourself down about three or four seconds before impact."

"Not three or four seconds after impact," Tom added helpfully. "That'll be too late."

"Thanks!"

Alex looked around. There was nobody in sight. He half wished a policeman or somebody from the villa would come along and put a stop to this before he could actually jump. But the gardens were empty. The white marble heads stared past him, not remotely interested.

"You'll go from nought to sixty miles an hour in about three seconds," Jerry went on. "I've put on a mesh slider, but you're still going to feel the opening shock. But at least that'll warn you you're about to land. That's when you get both feet and knees together. Put your chin on your chest. And try not to bite your tongue in half."

"I almost did on my first time."

"Yes." Single words were about all Alex could manage.

Jerry looked over the precipice. "The roof of Consanto is right beneath us and there's no wind. You won't have much time to steer but you can try pulling on the toggles." He rested a hand on Alex's shoulder. "I could do this for you, if you like," he said.

"No." Alex shook his head. "Thanks, Jerry. But it's down to me. It was my idea..."

"Good luck."

"Break a leg!" Tom exclaimed. "Or rather—don't."

Alex moved to the edge between two of the statues and looked down. He was right over the complex, although from this height it looked tiny, like a

silver Lego brick. Most of the workers would have left by now but there would still be guards. He would just have to hope that nobody looked up in the few seconds it would take him to arrive. But that was what he had observed earlier, outside the gate. Consanto faced the sea. The main road and the entrance were on the same side. That was where all their attention was focused, and if Alex was lucky, he would be able to drop in—quite literally—unnoticed.

His stomach heaved. There was no feeling in his legs. He felt as if he were floating. He tried to take a deep breath but the air didn't seem to want to rise above his chest. Did it really matter to him so much, penetrating Consanto, finding out how it might be involved with Scorpia? What would Tom and his brother say if he changed his mind, even at this last minute?

To hell with it, he thought. Lots of teenagers did BASE jumps. Jerry himself had recently jumped off the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia. It had been Bridge Day, the one day in the year when the jump was legal in America, and he had said there'd been dozens of kids waiting in line. It was a sport. People did it for fun. If he hesitated for one more second, he would never do it. It was time to get it over with.

In a single movement he climbed onto the parapet, checked the line from the pilot chute, took one last look at the target and jumped.

It was like committing suicide.

It was like nothing he had ever experienced.

Everything was a blur. There was the sky, the edge of the cliff and (unless he imagined it) Tom's staring face.

Then it all tilted. The blue rushed into the grey with the white of the roof punching up. The wind hammered into his face. His eyes were being sucked into the backs of their sockets with the sudden acceleration. He had to deploy. No. Jerry had warned him about this. How many seconds?

Now!

He threw out the pilot chute, hoping it would find the clean airflow that was meant to surround him. Had it worked? The chute had already disappeared, dragging with it the bridle line which would in turn suck the Blackjack canopy out of its pack. God! He'd left it too late. He was falling too fast. A long, silent scream with the wind in his ears, skin crawling. Where was the bloody chute? Where was up? Where was down? Falling...

And then there was a sudden wrenching, braking sensation. He thought he was being torn in half. He could see something, ropes and billowing material, just outside his vision. The canopy! But that didn't matter. Where was he going? He looked down and saw his own feet, dangling in space. A white rectangle was racing up to meet them. The roof of the complex—but it was too far away. He was going to miss. Quick. Pull the toggles. That's better. The roof tilted back towards him. What had he forgotten? Flaring! He pulled down on both brakes, dropping the tail of the canopy so that—like a plane landing—he came in at an upward angle. But had he left it too late?

All he could see was the surface of the roof. Then he hit it. He felt the shock travel through his ankles, his knees and up into his thighs. He ran forward. The canopy was dragging him. Jerry had warned him about this. There might be a stronger breeze lower down and if he wasn't careful he would be pulled off the roof. He could see the edge racing towards him. He dug in his heels, reaching behind him for the risers. He caught hold of them and pulled them in. Stop running! With just centimetres to spare, he managed to get a grip with the balls of his feet. He leant back, tugging the canopy towards him. He sat down hard.

He had arrived.

For a few seconds he did nothing. He was experiencing the massive high that all BASE jumpers know and which makes the sport so addictive. His body was releasing a flood of adrenalin and it was coursing through his entire system. His heart was pumping at double speed. He could feel every hair on his skin standing up. He looked back up at the cliff. There was no sign of Tom or his brother. Even if they had been standing there, they would have been too small to see. Alex couldn't believe how far he'd travelled, or how quickly he'd arrived.

And as far as he could tell, the guards had kept their heads down, their eyes on the ground, not the air. So much for Consanto's security!

Alex waited until his heart and pulse rate had returned to normal, then pulled off the helmet and protective pads. He quickly folded the chute and packed it as best as he could inside the bag. He could taste blood in his mouth and realized that, despite Jerry's warnings, he'd still managed to bite his tongue.

Keeping low, he carried the bag with the canopy over to the door that he had seen earlier from the ground. He was going to have to leave Jerry's equipment up here on the roof until it was time to leave. He had more or less worked out how he was going to get out of Consanto. The easiest way would simply be to call the police and get himself arrested. At the very worst, he would be prosecuted for trespassing. But he was only fourteen. He doubted he would find himself in an Italian jail—more likely they would pack him off back to England.

The door was ajar. He had been right about that. A dozen cigarette butts on the roof told their own story. Despite all the security guards, the cameras and the high-tech alarms, a single smoker in need of a fag had found his way up here and blown the whole place wide open.

Well, that was fine. Alex slipped in through the door and found a flight of metal steps leading down. There was a set of more solid-looking doors—steel with small glass windows—and for a moment Alex thought his way was blocked. But there must have been some sort of sensor. They slid open as he approached, then closed again after him. Perhaps the anonymous smoker had set it up that way. Alex turned and waved a hand. The doors didn't move. A numerical keypad on the wall told him the bad news. Getting in this way was one thing. But to get out again, he would need a code. He was trapped.

There was only one way to go and that was forward. He followed a blank white corridor down to another set of doors which hissed open and shut as he passed through. He had entered the core of the complex. There was an immediate difference to the air quality. It was extremely cold and smelt metallic. He glanced up and noticed a brightly polished silver duct running the full length of the passage. There were dials and monitors everywhere.

Already his head was beginning to ache. This place was just too clean.

He kept moving, wanting to see as much as possible before he was discovered. There didn't seem to be anyone around—all the workers must have gone home for the night—but it could only be a matter of time before security looked in. He heard a door open somewhere. Alex's heart flipped and he quickly searched for somewhere to hide. The corridor was bare, brightly lit by powerful neon lights behind glass panels. There wasn't so much as a shadow to give him cover. He saw a doorway and hurried over to it, but the door was locked. Alex pressed himself against the door,

hoping against hope that he wouldn't be seen.

A man appeared round the corner. At first it was hard to be sure that it was a man. The figure was wrapped in a pale blue protective suit that covered every centimetre of his body. He had a hood over his head and a glass mask in front of his face, obscuring most of his features—but then he turned sideways and Alex caught a glimpse of glasses and a beard. The man was pushing what looked like a huge tea urn, shining chrome, mounted on wheels. The urn was as tall as he was, with a series of valves and pipes on the lid. To Alex's relief the man turned off down a second corridor.

Alex looked at the door which had provided him with minimal cover. It had a thick glass window—like the front of a washing machine—and there was a large room on the other side, still lit but empty. Alex supposed it must be a laboratory but it looked more like a distillery, with more urns, some of them suspended on chains.

There was a metal staircase leading up to some sort of gantry and a whole wall lined with what looked like enormous fridge doors. All the metal looked brand new, brilliantly polished.

As Alex watched, a woman crossed the room.

The complex obviously wasn't as deserted as he had thought. She was also dressed in protective clothes, with a mask over her face, and she was pushing a silver trolley. His breath frosted on the glass as he tried to peer in. It didn't make any sense, but the woman seemed to be carrying eggs ... hundreds of them, neatly lined up on trays. They were the size of ordinary chickens' eggs, every one of them pure white. Could the woman be part of the catering team? Alex doubted it. There was something almost sinister about the eggs. Perhaps it was their uniformity, the fact that they were all so obviously identical. The woman went behind some machinery and disappeared. Increasingly puzzled, Alex decided it was time to move on.

He went down the second corridor, following the direction of the man with the urn. Now he could hear machinery, a soft, rhythmic clattering. He came to a glass panel set in the wall and looked through it into a darkened room, where a second woman sat in front of a bizarre, complicated machine that seemed to be sorting hundreds of test tubes, rotating them, counting them, labelling them and finally delivering them into her hands.

What was being made at Consanto Enterprises? Chemical weapons, perhaps? And how the hell was he going to get out again? Alex glanced down and noticed his hands, still grubby from his BASE jump. He was dirty and sweaty and he was surprised he hadn't set off every single alarm in the building.

Surrounded by these white panelled walls with the air being sucked in and sterilized, he had become the equivalent of an enormous germ and the monitors should have screamed the moment he came near.

He arrived at another set of doors and was relieved when these slid open to allow him through. Perhaps he might be able to find his way out after all. But these doors led only to another corridor, a little wider than the one he had just left, but equally unpromising. It occurred to him that he was still on the top floor. He had entered from the roof. He needed to find a lift or staircase that would take him down.

Suddenly a door about ten metres away opened and a man appeared, staring at Alex in disbelief.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?" he demanded.

Alex registered that the man was talking in English. At the same time, he recognized him: the bald head, the hooked nose and the thick black glasses. He was wearing a white laboratory coat hanging loose over a jacket and tie but the last time Alex had seen him he had been in fancy dress. This was Dr Liebermann, the guest he had seen talking to Mrs Rothman at the party in Venice.

"I..." Alex wasn't sure what to say. "I'm lost," he muttered helplessly.

"You can't come in here! This is a secure area. Who are you?"

"My name's Tom. My dad works here."

"What is his name? What is his department?" Dr Liebermann wasn't going to buy the little boy lost routine.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"My dad brought me. But if you'd like to show me the way out, that's fine by me."

"No! I'm calling security. You can come with me!"

Dr Liebermann took a step back towards the room from which he'd come. Alex wasn't sure what to do. Should he try to run? Once the alarm went off, it would only be a matter of minutes before he was caught. And what then? He had assumed that Consanto would simply hand him over to the police. But if they were hiding something here, if he had seen something secret, maybe he wouldn't be that fortunate.

Dr Liebermann was reaching out for something and Alex saw an alarm button next to the door.

"It's all right, Harold. I'll deal with this."

The voice came from behind Alex.

Alex spun round and felt his heart sink. It was like a bad dream. Nile, the man who had knocked him unconscious and left him to drown, was standing behind him, a smile on his face, totally relaxed. He too was wearing a white coat. In his case, it hung over jeans and a tight-fitting T-shirt. He had a grey attaché case in one hand but, as Alex watched, he set it down on the floor beside him.

"I wasn't expecting to see you again." Harold Liebermann was puzzled.

"Mrs Rothman sent me back."

"Why?"

Well, as you can see, Dr Liebermann, there's a very serious breakdown in security. Before she left she asked me to deal with it."

"Do you know this boy? Who is he?"

"His name is Alex Rider."

"He said his name was Tom."

"He's lying. He's a spy."

Alex was caught in the middle of this conversation, one man on either side of him. He was trapped. He felt dazed, and he knew there was nothing he could do. Nile was too fast and too strong for him. He had already proved that.

"What are you going to do?" Dr Liebermann demanded. He sounded peeved, as if neither Alex nor Nile had any right to be there.

"I just told you, Harold. We can't have security problems. I'm going to deal with it."

Nile reached under his coat and produced one of the most lethal-looking weapons Alex had ever seen. It was a samurai sword, very slightly curving, with an ivory hilt and a flat, razor-sharp blade. But it was half sized—

somewhere between a sword and a dagger. Nile held it for a moment in his hand, obviously enjoying the fine balance, then raised it to the height of his shoulder. Now he could throw it or slash with it. Either way, Alex knew instantly, he was facing a master. He had perhaps seconds to live.

"You can't kill him here!" Dr Liebermann exclaimed in exasperation. "You'll get blood everywhere!"

"Don't worry, Harold," Nile replied. "This is going through the neck and into the brain. There'll be very little blood."

Alex crouched down, preparing to dodge, knowing that he wouldn't have a chance. Nile was still smiling, obviously enjoying himself.

He threw the sword.

There was a single movement. Alex hadn't even seen Nile take aim but the blade was already a blur, flashing down the length of the passageway. It passed over Alex's shoulder. Had Nile missed? No. That was impossible.

He suddenly realized that Nile hadn't been aiming at him.

Alex turned and saw Dr Liebermann already dead, still standing, a look of surprise on his face. He had managed to bring one hand up so that it was lightly holding the blade of the sword now sticking out of his neck. He pitched forward and lay motionless.

"Straight into the brain," Nile muttered. "Just like I said."

As Alex watched, stunned, Nile walked past him and crouched down beside Dr Liebermann. He pulled the sword free, used the dead man's tie to wipe it clean, and returned it to its sheath, which hung from his waist beneath his lab coat. He looked up.

"Hello, Alex," he said cheerfully. "You're the last person I expected to see here. Mrs Rothman will be pleased."

"You don't want to kill me?" Alex murmured. He still couldn't believe what had just happened.

"Not at all."

Nile stood up and went back to the attaché case and opened it. Alex was finding it very difficult to keep up with what was happening. Inside the case, he saw a keyboard, a small computer screen, two square packets and a series of wires. Nile knelt down and tapped rapidly on the keyboard. A series of codes appeared on the screen: black and white like the fingers that were typing them. He continued talking as he typed.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Alex. I have to say, I'm terribly sorry for what happened at the Widow's Palace. I didn't realize who you were—John Rider's son. I think it's brilliant how you managed to escape, by the way.

I'd never have forgiven myself if I'd had to go in and fish you out with a boathook." He finished typing, pressed ENTER, then closed the lid of the case. "But we can't talk now. Mrs Rothman is just along the coast, in Positano. She's dying to meet you. So let's go."

"Why did you kill Dr Liebermann?" Alex asked.

"Because Mrs Rothman ordered me to." Nile straightened up. "Look, I'm sure you've got a lot of questions, but I can't answer them right now. I've just set a bomb to blow this place to smithereens in"—he glanced at his watch—"ninety-two seconds. So I don't think we have time for a chat."

He slid the case near Dr Liebermann's head, checked the dead man one last time, then walked away. Alex followed him. What else could he do? Nile came to a set of doors and tapped in a code. The doors opened and they went through. They were moving quickly. Nile had the athlete's ability to cover a lot of ground with no apparent effort at all. Here was the staircase that Alex had been looking for. They went down three floors and came to another door. Nile punched in a number and suddenly they were in the open air. There was a car—a two-seater Alfa Romeo Spider—waiting outside with the roof down.

"Hop in!" Nile said. From the way he was talking, he and Alex could have just come from the cinema and been on their way home.

Alex got in and they drove off. How much time had passed since Nile had set the bomb? It was now completely dark outside. The sun had finally disappeared. They followed a tarmac drive to the main checkpoint. Nile smiled at the guard.

"Grazie. E' stato bello verdevi..."

Thank you. It was good to see you. Alex already knew from their first meeting that Nile spoke Italian. The guard nodded and raised the barrier.

Nile gunned the accelerator and the car shot off smoothly. Alex twisted round in his seat. A few seconds later there was an enormous explosion.

It was as if a fist of orange flame had decided to punch its way out of the main complex. Windows shattered.

Smoke and fire rushed out. Thousands of pieces of glass and steel, a deadly rainfall, showered down. Alarms—shrill and deafening—erupted. A huge bite had been taken out of the side and the roof of the building. Alex had seen the size of the bomb. It was hard to believe that it could have caused so much damage.

Nile glanced in the mirror, examining his handiwork. He tutted.

“These industrial accidents,” he murmured. “You can never tell when one is going to happen next.”

He steered the Alfa Spider along the coastal road, already doing eighty miles an hour. Behind him Consanto Enterprises burned, the flames leaping up and reflecting in the dark and silent sea.

Chapter 8: DESIGNER LABELS

Alex stood on the balcony and gazed at the sweeping view of the town of Positano and the black water of the Mediterranean beyond. Two hours had passed since sunset but the warmth lingered in the air. He was dressed in a towelling robe, his hair still wet from the power shower with its jets of steaming hot water blasting him from all directions. There was a glass of fresh lime juice and ice on the table next to him. From the moment he had met Nile for the second time, he had thought he was in a dream. Now that dream seemed to have taken him in a new and very strange direction.

The hotel, first. It was called The Sirenuse and, as Nile had been eager to tell him, it was one of the most luxurious in the whole of southern Italy. Alex's room was huge and didn't look like a hotel room at all—more like a guest suite in an Italian palace. The bed was king-sized with pure white Egyptian cotton sheets. He had his own desk, a thirty-six-inch TV with video and DVD players, a sprawling leather sofa and, on the other side of the huge windows, his own private terrace. And the bathroom! As well as the power shower, there was a bath big enough for a football team, together with a spa bath. Everything was marble, and decorated with hand-crafted tiles. The millionaire suite. Alex shuddered to think how much it must cost a night.

Nile had driven him down here from what was left of Consanto Enterprises. Neither of them had spoken on the short journey. There were a hundred things Alex wanted to ask Nile, but the rush of wind and the roar of the Alfa Spider's 162kW quad camshaft V6 engine made conversation impossible. Anyway, Alex got the impression that Nile wasn't the one with the answers. It had only taken them twenty minutes, following the coastline, and suddenly they were there, parked in front of a hotel that was deceptively small and ordinary—

from the outside.

While Alex signed in, Nile made a quick call on his mobile.

"Mrs Rothman is absolutely thrilled you're here," he said. "She's going to have dinner with you at nine thirty.

She's asked me to send up some clothes." He weighed Alex up. "I've got a good eye for size. Do you have any particular likes or dislikes when it comes to style?"

Alex shrugged. "Whatever you want."

"Good. The bellboy will take you up to your room. I'm so glad I ran into you, Alex. I know you and I are going to be friends. Enjoy your dinner. The food here is world class."

He went back to the car and drove away.

I know you and I are going to be friends. Alex shook his head in disbelief. Just two nights ago the same man had knocked him unconscious and left him in a subterranean cell to drown.

He was shaken out of these thoughts by the arrival of an elderly man in a uniform, who gestured and then led Alex up to his room on the second floor, taking him along corridors filled with antiques and fine art. At last he was left on his own. He checked at once. The door was unlocked. The two phones on the desk had dialling tones. He could presumably call anyone, anywhere in the world ... and that included the police. He had, after all, just witnessed the destruction of a large part of Consanto Enterprises and the murder of Harold Liebermann.

But Nile obviously trusted him to stay silent, at least until he had met Mrs Rothman. He could also walk out if he wanted to. Simply disappear. But again, they assumed he would want to stay. It was all very puzzling.

Alex sipped his drink and considered the view.

It was a beautiful night, the sky stretching to eternity with thousands of brilliant stars. He could hear the waves rolling in, far below. The town of Positano was built on a steep hillside, shops, restaurants, houses and flats all piled up on top of one another, with a series of interlocking alleyways and a single, narrow street zigzagging all the way down to the horseshoe bay below. There were lights everywhere. The holiday season was drawing to a close but the place was still crowded with people determined to enjoy the summer right to the end.

There was a knock at the door. Alex went back into the room and walked across the shining marble floor. A waiter in a white jacket and a black bow tie had appeared. "Your clothes, sir," he said. He handed Alex a case.

"Mr Nile suggested the suit for tonight," he added as he turned to leave.

Alex opened the case. It was full of clothes, all of them expensive, all of them brand new. The suit was on the top. He took it out and laid it on the bed. It was charcoal grey, silk, with a Miu Miu label. There was a white shirt to go with it: Armani. Underneath, he found a slim leather box. He opened it and gasped. They had even provided him with a new watch, a Baume & Mercier with a polished steel bracelet. He lifted it out and weighed it in his hand. It must have cost hundreds of pounds. First the room, now all this! He was certainly having money thrown at him—and like the water in the power shower, it was coming from all directions.

He thought for a moment. He wasn't sure what he was letting himself in for but he might as well play along with it for the time being. It was almost nine thirty and he was ravenous. He got dressed and examined himself in the mirror. The suit was in the classic mod style, with small lapels that barely came down to his chest, and tightly fitted trousers. The tie was dark blue, narrow and straight. Mrs Rothman had also provided him with black

suede shoes from D&G. It was quite an outfit. Alex barely recognized himself.

At exactly nine thirty he entered the restaurant on the lower ground floor. The hotel, he now realized, was built on the side of the hill, so it was much bigger than it seemed, with much of it on levels below the entrance and reception. He found himself in a long arched room with tables spilling out onto another long terrace. It was lit by hundreds of tiny candles in glass chandeliers. The place was crowded. Waiters were hurrying from table to table and the room was filled with the clatter of knives against plates and the low murmur of conversation.

Mrs Rothman had the best table, in the middle of the terrace, with views over Positano and out to sea. She was sitting on her own with a glass of champagne, waiting for him. She wore a low-cut black dress set off by a simple diamond necklace. She saw him, smiled and waved. Alex walked over to her, feeling suddenly self-conscious in the suit. Most of the other diners seemed to be casually dressed. He wished now that he hadn't put on the tie.

"Alex, you look wonderful." She ran her dark eyes over him. "The suit fits you perfectly. It's Miu Miu, isn't it?"

I love the style. Please, sit down."

Alex took his place at the table. He wondered what anyone watching might think. A mother and her son out for the evening? He felt like an extra in a film—and he was beginning to wish someone would show him the script.

"It's been a while since I ate dinner with my own toy boy. Will you have some champagne?"

"No, thank you."

"What then?"

A waiter had appeared out of nowhere and was hovering by Alex, ready to take his order.

"I'll have an orange juice, please. Freshly squeezed. With ice."

The waiter bowed and went to fetch it. Alex waited for Mrs Rothman to speak. He was playing the game her way, and she was the one with the rules.

"The food here is absolutely wonderful," she informed him. "Some of the best cooking in Italy—and, of course, Italian is the best food in the world. I hope you don't mind, but I've already ordered for you. If there's anything you don't like, you can send it back."

"That's fine."

Mrs Rothman lifted her glass. Alex could see the tiny bubbles rising to the surface in the honey-coloured liquid.

"I shall drink to your health," she announced. "But first you have to say you've forgiven me. What happened to you at the Widow's Palace was monstrous. I feel totally embarrassed."

"You mean, trying to kill me," Alex said.

"My dear Alex! You came to my party without an invitation. You crept round the house and sneaked into my study. You mentioned a name which should have got you killed instantly, and you're really very lucky that Nile decided to drown you rather than break your neck. So although what happened was very unfortunate, you can hardly say it was unprovoked. Of course, it would all have been different if we'd known who you were."

"I told Nile my name."

"It obviously didn't register with him, and he didn't mention it to me until the morning afterwards. I was so shocked when I heard. I couldn't believe it. Alex Rider, the son of John Rider, in my house—and he'd been locked in that place and left to..." She shuddered and briefly closed her eyes. "We had to wait for the water to go down before we could open the door. I was sick with worry. I thought we were going to be too late. And then... We looked inside and there was nobody there. You'd done a Houdini and disappeared. I assume you swam down the old well?"

Alex nodded.

"I'm amazed it was big enough. Anyway, I was furious with Nile. He wasn't thinking. The very fact that you were called Rider should have been enough. And for him to run into you a second time at Consanto! What were you doing there, by the way?"

"I was looking for you."

She paused, thinking. "You must have seen the brochure in my desk. And did you overhear me talking to Harold Liebermann?" She didn't wait for an answer. "There's one thing I absolutely have to know. How did you get into the complex?"

"I jumped off the terrace at Ravello."

"With a parachute?"

"Of course."

Mrs Rothman threw back her head and laughed loudly. At that moment, she looked more like a film star than anyone Alex had ever met. Not just beautiful, but supremely confident. "That's wonderful," she declared.

"That's really quite wonderful."

"It was a borrowed parachute," Alex added. "It belonged to the brother of a friend of mine. I've lost all his equipment. And they'll be wondering where I am."

Mrs Rothman was sympathetic. "You'd better call them and let them know you survived. And tomorrow I'll write your friend's brother a cheque. It's

the least I can do after everything that's happened."

The waiter arrived with Alex's orange juice and the first course: two plates of ravioli. The little white parcels were wonderfully fresh, filled with wild mushrooms and served with a salad of rocket and Parmesan. Alex tasted one. He had to admit that the food was as delicious as Mrs Rothman had promised.

"What's wrong with Nile?" he asked.

"He can be exceptionally stupid. Act first, ask questions later. He never stops to think."

"I meant his skin."

"Oh that! He suffers from vitiligo. I'm sure you've heard of it. It's a skin disorder. His skin is lacking pigment cells or something like that. Poor Nile! He was born black but he'll be white by the time he dies. But let's not talk about him. There are so many other things we need to discuss."

"You knew my father."

"I knew him very well, Alex. He was an extremely good friend of mine. And I have to say, you're his spitting image. I can't tell you how strange it is to be sitting here with you. Here I am, fifteen years older. But you..."

She looked deep into his eyes. Alex saw that she was examining him but at the same time he felt as if she were sucking something out of him. "It's almost as if he's come back," she said.

"I want to know about him."

"What can I tell you that you don't know already?"

"I don't know anything, except what Yassen Gregorovich told me." Alex paused. This was the moment he had been dreading. This was the reason he was here. "Was he an assassin?" he asked.

But Mrs Rothman didn't answer. Her gaze had drifted away. "You met Yassen Gregorovich," she said. "Was it he who led you to me?"

"I was there when he died."

"I was sorry about Yassen. I heard he'd been killed."

"I want to know about my father," Alex insisted. "He worked for an organization called Scorpia. He was a killer. Is that right?"

"Your father was my friend."

"You're not answering my question," he said, trying not to get angry. Mrs Rothman seemed friendly enough but he already knew that she was very rich and very ruthless. He suspected that he would regret it if he got on the wrong side of her.

Mrs Rothman herself was perfectly calm. "I don't want to talk about him," she said. "Not yet. Not until I've had a chance to talk about you."

"What do you want to know about me?"

"I know a great deal about you already, Alex. You have an amazing reputation. That's the reason why we're sitting here tonight. I have an offer to make, something that may startle you. But I want you to understand, right from the start, that you're completely free. You can walk away any time. I don't want to hurt you. Quite the opposite. All I'm asking is that you consider what I have to say and then tell me what you think."

"And then you'll tell me about my dad?"

"Everything you want to know."

"All right."

Mrs Rothman had finished her champagne. She gestured with one hand and immediately a waiter appeared to refill her glass. "I love champagne," she said. "Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

"I don't drink alcohol."

"That's probably wise." Suddenly she was serious. "From what I understand, you've worked for MI6 four times," she began. "There was that business with the Stormbreaker computers. Then the school they sent you to in the French Alps. Then you were in Cuba. And finally you crossed paths with Damian Cray. What I want to know is, why did you do it? What did you get out of it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were you paid?"

Alex shook his head. "No."

Mrs Rothman considered for a moment. "Then ... are you a patriot?"

Alex shrugged. "I like Britain," he said. "And I suppose I'd fight for it if there was a war. But I wouldn't call myself a patriot. No."

"Then you need to answer my question. What are you doing risking your life and getting injured for MI6?"

You're not going to tell me it's because you're fond of Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones. I've met both of them and I can't say they did anything for me! You've put your life on the line for them, Alex. You've been hurt—nearly killed. Why?"

Alex was confused. "What are you getting at?" he demanded. "Why are you asking me all this?"

"Because, as I said, I want to make you an offer."

“What offer?”

Mrs Rothman ate some of her ravioli. She used only a fork, cutting each pasta envelope in half, then spearing it with the prongs. She ate very delicately, and Alex could see the pleasure in her eyes. It wasn't just food for her.

It was a work of art.

“How would you like to work for me?” she asked.

“For Scorpia?”

“Yes.”

“Like my father?”

She nodded.

“You're asking me to become a killer?”

“Perhaps.” She smiled. “You have a great many skills, Alex. For a fourteen-year-old you're quite remarkable—

and, of course, being so young, you could be very useful to us in all sorts of different ways. I imagine that's why Mr Blunt has been so keen to hang on to you. You can do things and go places that an adult can't.”

“What is Scorpia?” Alex demanded. “What were you doing at Consanto? What is Consanto? What were they making in that complex? And why did you have to kill Dr Liebermann?”

Mrs Rothman finished eating her first course and laid down her fork. Alex found himself hypnotized by the diamonds around her neck. They were reflecting the light from the candles, each jewel multiplying and magnifying the yellow flames.

“What a lot of questions!” she remarked. She shrugged. “Consanto Enterprises is a perfectly ordinary biomedical company. If you want to know about them, you can look them up in the phone book. They have offices all over Italy. As to what we were doing there, I can't tell you. At the moment we're involved in an operation called Invisible Sword, but there's no reason for you to know anything about it. Not yet. I will, however, tell you why we had to kill Dr Liebermann. It's really very simple. It was because he was unreliable.

We paid him a great deal to help us in a certain matter. He was worried about what he was doing and at the same time he wanted more money. A man like that can be a danger to us all. It was safer to get rid of him.

“But let's go back to your first question. You want to know about Scorpia. That's why you were in Venice and that's why you've followed me here. Very well. I'll tell you.”

She sipped her champagne, then set the glass down. Alex suddenly realized that their table had been positioned so that they could talk without being overheard. Even so, Mrs Rothman moved a little closer before she spoke.

“As you guessed, Alex, Scorpia is a criminal organization,” she began. “The S stands for sabotage. The CORP

comes from corruption. The I is intelligence—in other words, spying. And the A is for assassination. These are our main areas of expertise, though there are others. We are successful and that has made us powerful. We can be found all over the world. The secret services can't do anything about us. We're too big and they've left it too late. Anyway, occasionally some of them make use of us. They pay us to do their dirty work for them. We've learnt to live side by side!”

“And you want me to join you?” Alex put down his knife and fork, although he hadn't finished eating. “I'm not like you. I'm not like that at all.”

“How strange. Your father was.”

That hurt. She was talking about a man he had never had a chance to know. But her words cut straight to the heart of who and what he was.

“Alex, you have to grow up a little bit and stop seeing things in black and white. You work for MI6. Do you think of them as the good guys, the ones in white hats? I suppose that makes me the bad guy. Maybe I should be sitting here in a wheelchair with a bald head and a scar down my face, stroking a cat.” She laughed at the thought. “Unfortunately it's not as simple as that any more. Not in the twenty-first century. Think about Alan Blunt for a minute. Quite apart from the number of people he's had killed around the world, look at the way he's used you, for heaven's sake! Did he ask nicely before he pulled you out of school and turned you into a spy? I don't think so! You've been exploited, Alex, and you know it.”

“I'm not a killer,” Alex protested. “I never could be.”

“It's very strange that you should say that. I mean, I don't notice Damian Cray at the next table. I wonder what happened to him? Or how about that nice Dr Grief? I understand he didn't survive his last meeting with you.”

“They were accidents.”

“You seem to have had an awful lot of accidents in the last few months.”

She paused. When she spoke again her voice was softer, like a teacher talking to a favourite pupil.

“I can see you're still upset about Dr Liebermann,” she said. “Well, let me reassure you. He wasn't a nice man and I don't think anybody's going to miss him. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if his wife didn't send us a thank-you card.” She smiled as if at some private joke. “You could say his death was a shot in the arm for us all. And you have to remember, Alex. It was his choice. If he hadn't lied and cheated his company and come to work for us, he would still be alive. It wasn't all our fault.”

“Of course it was your fault. You killed him!”

"Well, yes. I suppose that's true. But we're a very large international business. And sometimes it does happen that people get in our way and they end up dead. I'm sorry, but that's just how it is."

A waiter came and took away the plates. Alex finished his orange juice, hoping the ice would help clear his head.

"I still can't join Scorpio," he said.

"Why not?"

"I have to go back to school."

"I agree." Mrs Rothman leant towards him. "We have a school; I want to send you there. It's just that our school will teach you things that you might find a little more useful than logarithms and English grammar."

"What sort of things?"

"How to kill. You say you could never do it, but how can you be sure? If you go to Malagosto, you'll find out.

Nile was a star student there; he's a perfect killer—or he would be. Unfortunately he has one rather irritating weakness."

"You mean his disease?"

"No. It's rather more annoying than that." She hesitated. "You could be better than him, Alex, in time. And although I know you don't like me mentioning it, your father was actually an instructor there. A brilliant one.

We were all devastated when he died."

And there it was again. Everything began and ended with John Rider. Alex couldn't avoid it any longer. He had to know.

"Tell me about my father," he said. "That's the reason I'm here. That's the only reason I came. How did he end up working for you? And how did he die?" Alex forced himself to go on. "I don't even know what his voice sounded like. I don't know anything about him at all."

"Are you sure you want to? It may hurt you."

Alex was silent.

Their waiter arrived with the main course. Mrs Rothman had chosen roast lamb; the meat was slightly pink and garlicky. A second waiter refilled her glass.

"All right," she said when they had gone. "Let's finish eating and talk about other things. You can tell me about Brookland. I want to know what music you listen to and what football team you support. Do you have a girlfriend? I'm sure a boy as handsome as you gets plenty of offers. Now I've made you blush. Have your dinner. I promise it's the best lamb you'll ever eat.

"And after we've finished, I'll take you upstairs and then I'll tell you everything you want to know."

Chapter 9: ALBERT BRIDGE

She led him to a room at the top of the hotel. There was no bed, just two chairs and a trestle table with a video player and a few files.

"I had this flown down from Venice as soon as I knew you were here," Mrs Rothman explained. "I thought it was something you'd want to see."

Alex nodded. After the bustle of the restaurant, he felt strange being here—like an actor on stage when the scenery has been removed. The room was large with a high ceiling, and its emptiness made everything echo. He walked over to the table, suddenly nervous. At dinner he had asked certain questions. Now he was going to be given the answers. Would he like what he heard?

Mrs Rothman came and stood beside him, her high heels rapping on the marble floor. She seemed completely relaxed. "Sit down," she invited.

Alex slipped off his jacket and hung it over the back of a chair. He loosened his tie, then sat. Mrs Rothman stood next to the table, studying him. It was a moment before she spoke.

"Alex," she began. "It's not too late to change your mind."

"I don't want to," he said.

"It's just that, if I'm going to talk to you about your father, I may say things that will upset you and I don't want to do that. Does the past really matter? Does it make any difference?"

"I think it does."

"Very well..."

She opened a file and took out a black and white photograph. It showed a handsome man in military uniform, wearing a beret. He was looking straight at the camera with his shoulders back and his hands clasped behind him. He was clean-shaven, with watchful, intelligent eyes.

"This is your father, aged twenty-five. The photograph was taken five years before you were born. Do you really know nothing about him?"

"My uncle spoke to me about him a bit. I know he was in the army."

"Well, maybe I can fill in some gaps for you. I'm sure you know that he was born in London and went to a secondary school in Westminster. From there he went to Oxford and got a first in politics and economics. But his heart had always been set on joining the army. And that's what he did. He joined the Parachute Regiment at Aldershot. That in itself was quite an achievement. The Paras are one of the toughest regiments in the British Army, second only to the SAS. And you don't just join them; you have to be invited.

"Your father spent three years with the Paras. He saw action in Northern Ireland and Gambia, and he was part of the attack on Goose Green in the Falkland Islands in May 1982. He carried a wounded soldier to safety even though he was under fire and, as a result of this, he received a medal from the Queen. He was also promoted to the rank of captain."

Alex had once seen the medal: the Military Cross. Ian Rider had always kept it in the top drawer of his desk.

"He returned to England and got married," Mrs Rothman went on. "He had met your mother at Oxford. She was studying medicine and eventually became a nurse. But I can't tell you very much about her. We never met and he never spoke about her, not to me.

"Anyway, I'm afraid it was shortly after he got married that things started to go wrong ... not, of course, that I'm blaming your mother. But just a few weeks after the wedding, your father was in a pub in London when he got involved in a fight. There were some people making remarks about the Falklands War. They were probably drunk. I don't know. There was a skirmish and he struck a man and killed him. It was a single blow to the throat ... just like he had been trained to inflict. And that, I'm afraid, was that."

Mrs Rothman took out a newspaper clipping from the file and handed it to Alex. It had to be at least fifteen years old. He could tell from the faded print and the way the paper had yellowed. He read the headline: Jail for

'brilliant soldier' who lost his way

There was another photo of John Rider but now he was in civilian dress, surrounded by photographers, getting out of a car. The picture was a little blurred and it had been taken long ago, but looking at it Alex could almost feel the pain of the man, the sense that the world had turned against him. He read the article.

John Rider, described as a brilliant soldier by his commanding officer, was sentenced to four years for manslaughter following the death of Ed Savitt nine months ago in a Soho bar.

The jury heard that Rider, twenty-seven, had been drinking heavily when he became involved in a fight with Savitt, a taxi driver. Rider, who was decorated for valour in the Falklands War, killed Savitt with a single blow to the head. The jury heard that Rider was a highly trained expert in several martial arts.

Summing up, Judge Gillian Padgham said: "Captain Rider has thrown away a promising army career in a single moment of madness. I have taken his distinguished record into consideration. But he has taken a life and society demands that he pays the price.

"I'm sorry," Mrs Rothman said softly. She had been watching Alex closely. "You didn't know."

"My uncle showed me the medal once," Alex said. "He had to stop for a moment. His voice was hoarse. "But he never showed me this."

"It wasn't your father's fault. He was provoked."

"What happened next?"

"He was sent to jail. There was quite an outcry about it. He had a lot of public sympathy. But the fact was, he had killed a man and he was found guilty of manslaughter. The judge had no choice."

"And then?"

"They let him out after just a year. It was done very quietly. Your mother had stood by him; she never lost faith in him and he went back to live with her. Unfortunately his army career was over; he had received a dishonourable discharge. He was very much on his own."

"Go on." Alex's voice was cold.

"He found it difficult to get a job. It wasn't his fault; that's just the way it is. But by this time, he had come to the attention of our personnel department." Mrs Rothman paused. "Scorpia are always on the lookout for fresh talent," she explained. "It seemed quite obvious to us that your father had been unfairly treated. We thought he would be perfect for us."

"You approached him?"

"Yes. Your parents had very little money by this time. They were desperate. One of our people met your father, and two weeks later he came to us for evaluation." She smiled. "We test every new recruit, Alex. If you decide to join us, and I still hope you will, we'll take you to the same place we took your father."

"Where is that?"

"I mentioned the name to you. Malagosto. It's near Venice." Mrs Rothman wouldn't be any more precise than that. "We could see at once that your father was extremely tough and exceptionally talented," she went on. "He passed every test we threw at him with flying colours. We knew, by the way, that he had a brother—Ian Rider—

working for MI6. I was always a little surprised that Ian didn't try to help him when he got into trouble, but I suppose there was nothing he could do. Anyway, it made no difference, the two of them being brothers. Your father was indeed perfect for us. And after what had happened to him, I have to say that we were certainly perfect for him."

Alex was getting tired. It was almost eleven. But he knew there was no way he was leaving this room until the whole story had been told.

"So he joined Scorpia," he said.

"Yes. Your father worked for us as an assassin. He spent four months in the field."

"How many men did he kill?"

"Five or six. He was more interested in working as an instructor in the training school where he had been evaluated. You might like to know, Alex, that Yassen Gregorovich was one of the assassins he helped train.

Your father actually saved Yassen's life when they were on an assignment in the Amazon jungle."

Alex knew that Mrs Rothman was telling the truth. Yassen had said as much himself in the final seconds before he died.

"I got to know your father very well," Mrs Rothman went on. "We had dinner together many times, once even in this hotel." She threw her head back, letting her black hair trail down her neck, and for a moment her eyes were far away. "I was very attracted to him. He was an extremely good-looking man. He was also intelligent and he made me laugh. It was just unfortunate that he was married to your mother."

"Did she know what he was doing? Did she know about you?"

"I very much hope not." Suddenly Mrs Rothman was businesslike. "I have to tell you now how your father died. I wish you hadn't asked me to do this. Are you sure you want me to carry on?"

"Yes."

"All right." She took a deep breath. "MI6 wanted him. He was one of our best operatives and he was training others to become as effective as him. And so they set about hunting him down. I won't go into the details, but they set a trap for him on the island of Malta. As it happened, Yassen Gregorovich was there too. He escaped—

but your father was captured. We assumed that would be the last of him and that we would never see him again.

You may think that the death penalty has been abolished in Britain, but—as they say—accidents happen. But then there was a development...

"Scorpia had kidnapped the eighteen-year-old son of a senior British civil servant, a man with considerable influence in the government—or so we thought. Again, it's a complicated story and it's late, so I won't give you all the details. But the general idea was that if the father didn't do what we wanted, we would kill the son."

"That's what you do, is it?" Alex asked.

"Corruption and assassination, Alex. It's part of what we do. Anyway, as we quickly discovered, the civil servant was unable to do what we wanted. Unfortunately this meant we would have to kill the son. You can't make a threat and then have second thoughts about it, because if you do, nobody will ever fear you again. And so we were about to kill the boy in as dramatic a way as possible. But then, out of the blue, MI6 got in touch with us and offered us a deal.

"It was a straight swap. They'd give us back John Rider in return for the son. The executive board of Scorpia met and, although it was only carried

by a narrow vote. Alex decided to go ahead with the deal. Normally we would never have allowed an operation to become entangled in this way, but your father had been extremely valuable to us and, as I said, I was personally very close to him. So it was agreed. We would make the exchange at six o'clock in the morning—this was March. And it would take place on Albert Bridge."

"March? What year was this?"

"It was fourteen years ago, Alex: 13th March. You were two months old."

Mrs Rothman leant over the table and rested a hand on the television.

"Scorpio have always made a practice of recording everything that we do," she explained. "There's a good reason for this. We're a criminal organization. It automatically follows that nobody trusts us—not even our clients. They assume we lie, cheat ... whatever. We film what we do to prove that we are, in our own way, honest. We filmed the handover on Albert Bridge. If the civil servant's son had been hurt in some way, we would have been able to prove that it wasn't because of us."

She pressed a button and the screen flickered into life, showing images that had been taken in another time, when Alex was just eight weeks old. The first shot showed Albert Bridge, stretching over a chilly River Thames with Battersea Park on one side and the lower reaches of Chelsea on the other. It was drizzling. Tiny specks of water hovered in the air.

"We had three cameras," she said. "We had to conceal them carefully or MI6 would have removed them. But as you'll see, they tell the whole tale."

The first image. Three men in suits and overcoats. With them, a young man with his hands bound in front of him. This must be the son. He looked younger than eighteen. He was shivering.

"You are looking at the southern end of the bridge," Mrs Rothman explained. "This was what had been agreed."

Our agents would bring the son up from the park. MI6 and your father would be on the other bank. The two of them would walk across the bridge and the exchange would be made. As simple as that."

"There's no traffic," Alex said.

"At six o'clock in the morning? There would have been little anyway, but I suspect MI6 had probably closed the roads."

The image changed. Alex felt something twist in his stomach. The camera was concealed somewhere on the edge of the bridge, high up. It was showing him his father, the first moving image of John Rider he had ever seen. He was wearing a thick padded jacket. He was looking around him, taking everything in. Alex wished the camera would zoom in closer. He wanted to see more of his father's face.

"This is the classic method of exchange," Mrs Rothman told him. "A bridge is a neutral area. The two participants—in this case the boy and your father—are on their own. Nothing should go wrong."

She reached out a finger and pressed the pause button.

"Alex," she warned. "Your father died on Albert Bridge. I know you never knew him; you were just a baby when this happened. But I'm still not sure it's something you should see."

"Show me," Alex ordered. His voice sounded far away.

Mrs Rothman nodded. She pressed play.

The image unfroze. The pictures were now being taken by a hidden camera, hand-held, out of focus. Alex caught sight of the span of the bridge, hundreds of light bulbs curving through the air. There was the river again and, captured briefly in the distance, the great chimneys of Battersea Power Station. There was a cut. Now the picture was steady, a wide angle perhaps taken from a boat.

The three men with the civil servant's son were at one end. His father was at the other. Alex could make out three figures behind him; presumably they worked for MI6. The image quality was poor.

Dawn was only just breaking and there was little light. The water had no colour. A signal must have been given because the young man began to walk forward. At the same time, John Rider left the other group, also with his hands bound in front of him.

Alex wanted to reach out and touch the screen. He was watching his father walk towards the three Scorpio men.

But the figure in the picture was only a centimetre high. Alex knew it was his father. The face matched the photographs he had seen. But he was too far away. He couldn't see if John Rider was smiling or angry or nervous. Could he have had any idea of what was about to happen?

John Rider and the civil servant's son met in the middle of the bridge. They paused and seemed to speak to each other—but the only sound on the film was the soft patter of the rain and the occasional rush of an unseen speeding car. Then they began to walk again. The son was on the north side of the bridge, the side controlled by MI6. John Rider was moving south, a little faster now, heading for the waiting men.

"This is when it happened," Mrs Rothman said softly.

Alex's father was almost running. He must have sensed that something was wrong. He moved awkwardly, his hands still clasped in front of him. On the north side of the bridge, one of the MI6 people took out a radio transmitter and spoke briefly. A second later, there was a single shot. John Rider seemed to stumble and Alex realized that he had been hit in the back. He took two more steps, twisted and collapsed.

"Do you want me to turn it off, Alex?"

"No."

"There's a closer shot..."

The camera angle was lower. Alex could see his father lying on his side. The three Scorpio men had produced guns. They were running, aiming at the civil servant's son. Alex wondered why. The teenager hadn't had anything to do with what had just taken place. But then he understood. MI6 had

shot John Rider. They hadn't kept their side of the bargain. So the son had to die too.

But he had reacted incredibly quickly. He was already running, his head down. He seemed to know exactly what was happening. One of the Scorpia men fired and missed. Then there was a sudden explosion, a machine gun opening fire. Alex saw bullets ricocheting off the iron girders of the bridge. Light bulbs smashed. The tarmac surface seemed to leap up. The men hesitated and fell back. Meanwhile the teenager had reached the far end of the bridge. A car surged forward out of nowhere. Alex saw the door open and the son was pulled inside.

Mrs Rothman froze the image.

"It seems that MI6 wanted the son back but they weren't prepared to pay with your father's freedom," she said.

"They double-crossed us and shot him in front of our eyes. You saw for yourself."

Alex said nothing. The room seemed to have got darker, shadows chasing in from the corners. He felt cold from head to toe.

"There is one last part of the film," Mrs Rothman went on. "I hate seeing you like this, Alex. I hate having to show you. But you've seen this much; you might as well see the rest."

The last section of the film replayed the final moments of John Rider's life. Once again he was on his feet, beginning to run while the civil servant's son hurried the other way.

"Look at the MI6 agent who gave the order to fire," Mrs Rothman said.

Alex gazed at the tiny figures on the bridge.

Mrs Rothman pointed. "We had the image computer enhanced."

Sure enough, the camera leapt in closer, and now Alex could see that the MI6 agent with the transmitter was in fact a woman, wearing a black raincoat.

"We can get in closer."

The camera jumped forward again.

"And closer."

The same action, repeated a third and fourth time. The woman taking out her radio transmitter. But now her face filled the screen. Alex could see her fingers holding the device in front of her mouth. There was no sound, but he saw her lips move, giving the order, and he understood perfectly what she said.

Shoot him.

"There was a sniper in an office block on the north bank of the Thames," Mrs Rothman told him. "It was really just a matter of timing. The woman you're looking at masterminded the operation. It was one of her early successes in the field, one of the reasons why she was promoted. You know who she is."

Alex had known at once. She was fourteen years younger on the screen but she hadn't changed all that much.

And there could be no mistaking the black hair—cut short—the pale, businesslike face, the black eyes that could have belonged to a crow.

Mrs Jones, the deputy head of Special Operations at MI6.

Mrs Jones, who had been there when Alex was first recruited and who had pretended that she was his friend.

When he had returned to London, hurt and exhausted after his ordeal with Damian Cray, she had come looking for him and tried to help him. She had said she was worried about him. And all the time she had been lying. She had sat next to him and smiled at him, knowing that she had taken his father from him just weeks after he was born.

Mrs Rothman turned off the screen.

There was a long silence.

"They told me he died in a plane crash," Alex said in a voice that wasn't his own.

"Of course. They didn't want you to know."

"So what happened to my mother?" He felt a sudden rush of hope. If they had been lying about his father, then maybe she wasn't dead. Could it be at all possible? Was his mother somewhere in England, still alive?

"I'm so sorry, Alex. There was a plane crash. It happened a few months later. It was a private plane, and she was on her own, travelling to France." Mrs Rothman rested a hand on his arm. "Nothing can make up for what's been done to you, for all the lies you've been told. If you want to go back to England, back to school, I'll understand. I'm sure you just want to forget the whole lot of us. But if it's any consolation, I adored your father.

I still miss him. This was the last thing he sent me, just before he was taken prisoner in Malta."

She had opened a second file and taken out a postcard. It showed a strip of coastline, a setting sun. There were just a few lines, handwritten.

My clearest Julia,

A dreary time without you. Can't wait to be at the Widow's Palace with you again.

John R.

Alex recognized the handwriting although he had never seen it before, and in that instant any last, lingering doubt was swept away.

The writing was his father's.

But it was identical to his own.

"It's very late," Mrs Rothman said. "You really ought to get to bed. We can talk again tomorrow."

Alex looked at the screen as if expecting to see Mrs Jones mocking him across fourteen years, destroying his life before it had even really begun. For a long while he didn't speak. Then he stood up.

"I want to join Scorpia," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Go to Venice. Find Scorpia. Find your destiny, Yassen had told him. And that was what had happened. He had made up his mind. There could be no going back.

Chapter 10: HOW TO KILL

The island was only a few miles from Venice but it had been forgotten for a hundred years. Its name was Malagosto and it was shaped roughly like a crescent moon, just half a mile long. There were six buildings on the island, surrounded by wild grasses and poplars, and they all looked condemned. The largest of them was a monastery, built around a courtyard, with a red-brick bell tower, slanting very slightly, next to it. There was a crumbling hospital and then a row of what looked like apartment blocks with shattered windows and gaping holes in the roofs. A few boats went past Malagosto but never docked there. It was forbidden. And the place had a bad reputation.

There had once been a small, thriving community on the island. But that had been long ago, in the Middle Ages. It had been ransacked in 1380, during the war with Genoa, and after that it had been used for plague victims. Sneeze in Venice, it was said, and you would end up in Malagosto. When the plague died out it became a quarantine centre, and then, in the eighteenth century, a sanctuary for the insane. Finally it had been abandoned and left to rot. But there were fishermen who claimed that, on a cold winter's night, you could still hear the screams and demented laughter of the lunatics who had been the island's last residents.

Malagosto was the perfect base for Scorpia's Training and Assessment Centre. They had bought the island on a lease from the Italian government in the mid-eighties and they had been there ever since. If anyone asked what was happening there, they were told that it was now a business centre where lawyers, bankers and office managers could come for motivation and bonding sessions. This was, of course, a lie. Scorpia sent new recruits to the school that they ran on Malagosto. It was here that they learnt how to kill.

Alex Rider sat at the front of the motor launch, watching as the island drew nearer. It was the same motor launch that had led him to the Widow's Palace and the silver scorpion on the bow glistened in the sun. Nile was sitting opposite him, totally relaxed, dressed in white trousers and a blazer.

"I spent three months in training here," he shouted over the noise of the engine. "But that was a long time after your dad."

Alex nodded but said nothing. He could see the bell tower looming up, rising crookedly over the tops of the trees. The wind chased through his hair and the spray danced in his eyes.

Julia Rothman had left Positano before them that morning, returning to Venice, where she was involved in something that required her presence. They had met briefly after breakfast and this time she had been more serious and businesslike. Alex would spend the next few days on Malagosto, she said—not for full training, but for an initial assessment that would include a medical examination, psychological testing and a general overview of his fitness and aptitude. It would also give Alex time to reflect on his decision.

Alex's mind was dead. He had made his decision and, as far as he was concerned, nothing else mattered. Only one good thing had come out of last night. He hadn't forgotten Tom Harris and his brother. They had heard nothing from him since he had broken into Consanto yesterday evening—and there was still the question of all Jerry's equipment, left behind on the roof. But Mrs Rothman had promised to deal with that, as Alex had reminded her.

"Go ahead and call them," she had said. "Apart from anything else, we don't want them worrying about you and raising the alarm. As for the parachute and all the rest of it, I already told you. I'll send your friend's brother a cheque to cover the cost. Five thousand euros? That should do it." She had smiled. "You see, Alex?"

That's what I mean. We want to look after you."

After she had gone, Alex called Tom from his room. Tom was delighted to hear from him.

"We saw you land so we knew you hadn't got splatted," he said. "Then nothing happened for a while. And then the whole place blew up. Was that you?"

"Not exactly," Alex said.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Positano. I'm OK. But, Tom, listen to me..."

"I know." Tom's voice was flat. "You're not coming back to school."

"Not for a bit."

"Is this M16 again?"

"Sort of. I'll tell you one day." That was a lie. Alex knew he would never see his friend again. "Just tell Jerry that he's going to get a cheque soon to pay for all his stuff. And tell him thanks from me."

"What about Brookland?"

"It would be easier if you said you never saw me. As far as they're concerned, I disappeared in Venice and that was that."

"Alex ... you sound strange. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, Tom. Goodbye."

He hung up and felt a wave of sadness. It was as if Tom was the last link to the world he had known—and he had just severed the connection.

The boat pulled in. The boat was jettied, partially concealed in a natural fault line in the rock so that nobody could be watched arriving at or leaving the island. Nile sprang ashore. He had the ease and grace of a ballet dancer.

Alex had noticed the same thing once about Yassen Gregorovich.

"This way, Alex."

Alex followed. The two of them walked up a twisting path between the trees. For a moment the buildings were hidden.

"Can I tell you something?" Nile said. He flashed Alex his friendliest smile. "I was delighted you decided to join us. It's great to have you on the winning side."

"Thank you."

"But I hope you never change your mind, Alex. I hope you never try to trick us or anything like that. I'm sure you won't. But after what happened at the Widow's Palace, I'd hate to have to murder you again."

"Yes. It wasn't much fun the last time," Alex agreed.

"It would really upset me. Mrs Rothman is expecting great things from you. I hope you don't let her down."

They had passed through the copse and there was the monastery, its great walls peeling from age and neglect.

There was a heavy wooden door with a smaller door set in it, and next to it the one sign that the building might, after all, have been adapted to modern times: a keypad with a built-in video camera. Nile tapped in a code.

There was an electronic buzz and the smaller door opened.

"Welcome back to school!" Nile announced.

Alex hesitated. The new term at Brookland would start in a few days' time. And here he was about to enter a school of a very different kind. But it was too late for second thoughts. He was following the path his father had mapped out for him.

Nile was waiting. Alex went in.

He found himself in a open courtyard with cloisters on three sides and the bell tower rising up above the fourth.

The ground was a neat rectangle of grass with two cypress trees side by side at one end. A tile roof slanted in, covering the cloisters, like an old-fashioned tennis court. Five men dressed in white robes stood around an instructor, an older man dressed in black. As Alex and Nile entered, they stepped forward as one, lashed out with their fists and shouted—the *kiai* that Alex knew from karate.

"Sometimes, with the silent kill, it is not possible to shout out," the instructor said. He spoke with a Russian or Eastern European accent. "But remember the power of the silent *kiai*. Use it to drive your *chi* into the strike zone. Do not underestimate its power at the moment of the kill."

"That's Professor Yermalov," Nile told Alex. "He taught me when I was here. You don't want to get on the wrong side of him, Alex. I've seen him finish a fight with a single finger. Fast as a snake and about as friendly..."

They crossed the courtyard and went through an archway into a vast room with a multicoloured mosaic floor, ornate windows, pillars and intricate wooden angels carved into the walls. This might once have been a place of worship; now it was used as a refectory and meeting place, with long tables, modern sofas and a hatch leading into a kitchen beyond. The ceiling was domed and carried the faint remnants of a fresco. There had been angels here too but they had long ago faded.

There was a door on the far side. Nile went over to it and knocked.

"Entrez!" The voice, speaking French, was friendly.

They went into a tall, octagonal room. Books lined five of the eight walls. The ceiling, painted blue with silver stars, was at least twenty metres high. There was a ladder on wheels reaching up to the top shelves. Two windows looked out onto more woodland but much of the light was blocked out by leaves, and an iron chandelier with about a dozen electric bulbs hung down on a heavy chain. The centre of the room was taken up by a solid-looking desk with two antique chairs in front of it and one behind. This third chair was occupied by a small, plump man in a suit and waistcoat. He was working at a laptop computer, his stubby fingers typing at great speed. He was peering at the screen through gold-rimmed glasses. He had a neat black beard that tapered to a point under his chin. The rest of his hair was grey.

"Alex Rider! Please ... come in." The man looked up from his computer with obvious pleasure. "I would have recognized you at once. I knew your father very well and you look just like him." Apart from a slight French accent, his English was perfect. "My name is Oliver d'Arc. I am, you might say, the principal of this establishment—the head teacher, perhaps. I was just looking at your personal details on the Internet."

Alex sat down on one of the antique chairs. "I wouldn't have thought they'd be posted on the Internet," he commented.

"It depends which search engine you use." D'Arc gave Alex a sly smile. "I know Mrs Rothman told you that your father was an instructor here. I worked with him and he was a good friend to me, but I never dreamt that I would one day meet his son. And it is Nile who brings you here. Nile graduated from here a few years ago. He was a brilliant student—the number two in his class."

Alex glanced at Nile and for the first time saw a flicker of annoyance cross the man's face. He remembered what Mrs Rothman had said ... something about Nile having a weakness ... and he wondered what it was that had prevented him becoming number one.

"Are you thirsty after your journey?" d'Arc asked. "Can I get you anything? A sirop de grenadine, perhaps?"

Alex started. The red fruit juice was his favourite drink when he was in France. Had d'Arc got that off the Internet too?

"It was what your father always drank," d'Arc explained, reading his thoughts.

"I'm all right, thank you."

"Then let me tell you the programme. Nile will introduce you to the other students who are here at Malagosto.

There are never more than fifteen and at the moment there are only eleven. Nine men and two women. You will join in with them and over the next few days we will examine your progress. Eventually, if I consider you have the ability to become part of Scorpia, I will write a report and your real training will begin. But I have no doubts, Alex. You are very young, only fourteen. But you are John Rider's son and he was the very best."

"There's something I have to tell you," Alex said.

"Please. Go ahead." D'Arc sat back, beaming.

"I want to join Scorpia. I want to be part of what you do. But you might as well know now that I don't think I could kill anybody. I told Mrs Rothman and she didn't believe me. She said I'd only be doing what my dad had done, but I know how I am inside and I know I'm different to him."

Alex hadn't been sure how d'Arc would react. But he seemed completely unconcerned. "There are a great many Scorpia activities that do not involve killing," he said. "You could be very useful to us, for example, for blackmail. Or as a courier. Who would suspect that a fourteen-year-old on a school trip was carrying drugs or plastic explosives? But these are early days, Alex. You have to trust us. We will discover what you can and can't do and we will find the work that suits you best."

"I was eighteen when I killed my first man," Nile added. "That's only four years older than you are now."

"But, Nile, you were always exceptional," d'Arc purred.

There was a knock at the door and a moment later a woman came in. She was Thai, slender and delicate and several inches shorter than Alex. She had dark, intelligent eyes and lips that could have been drawn with an artist's pencil. She stopped and made the traditional greeting of the Thai people, bringing her hands together as if in prayer and bowing her head.

"Sawasdee, Alex," she said. "It is very nice to meet you." She had a very gentle voice and, like the principal, her English was excellent.

"This is Miss Binnag," d'Arc said.

"My name is Eijit. But you can call me Jet. I have come to take you to your room."

"You can rest this afternoon and I will see you again at dinner." D'Arc stood up. He was very short. His pointed beard only just rose above the level of the desk. "I'm so glad you're here, Alex. Welcome to Malagosto."

The woman called Jet led Alex out of the room, back across the main hall and down a corridor with a high vaulted ceiling and bare plaster walls.

"What do you do here?" Alex asked.

"I teach botany."

"Botany?" He couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"It is a very important part of the syllabus," Jet retorted. "There are many plants that can be useful to our work.

The oleander bush, for example. You can extract a poison similar to digitalis from the leaves and this will paralyse the nervous system and cause immediate death. The berries of the mistletoe can also be fatal. You must learn how to grow the rosary pea. Just one pea can kill an adult in minutes. Tomorrow you can come to my greenhouse, Alex. Every flower there is another funeral."

She spoke in a way that was completely matter-of-fact. Again Alex felt a sense of unease. But he said nothing.

They passed a classroom that might once have been a chapel, with more faded frescos on the walls, and no windows. Another teacher, with ginger hair and a ruddy, weather-beaten face, was standing in front of a blackboard, talking to half a dozen students, two of them women. There was a complicated diagram on the board and each student had what looked like a cigar box on the desk in front of them.

"...and you can lead the main circuit through the lid and back into the plastic explosive," he was saying. "And it's right here, in front of the lock, that I always put the trembler switch..."

Jet had paused briefly at the door. "This is Mr Ross," she whispered. "Technical specialist. He's from your country, from Glasgow. You'll meet him tonight."

They moved on. Behind him, Alex heard Mr Ross speaking again.

"Do try and concentrate, please, Miss Craig. We don't want you blowing us all up..."

They left the main building and walked over to the nearest apartment block that Alex had seen from the boat.

Again, the building looked dilapidated from the outside but it was elegant and modern inside. Jet showed Alex to an air-conditioned room on the second floor. It was on two levels, with a king-sized bed overlooking a large living space with sofas and a desk. There were french windows with a balcony and a sea view.

"I'll come back for you at five," Jet told him. "You have an appointment with the nurse. Mrs Rothman wants you to have a complete examination. We meet for drinks at six and dinner is early, at seven. There's a night exercise tonight; the students are diving. But don't worry. You won't be taking part."

She bowed a second time and backed out of the room. Alex was left alone. He sat down on one of the sofas, noticing that the room had a fridge, a television and even a PlayStation 2—presumably put in for his benefit.

What had he got himself into? Had he done the right thing? Dark uncertainties rose up in his mind and he deliberately forced them back again. He remembered the video he had been shown, the terrible images he had seen. Mrs Jones mouthing those two words into the radio transmitter. He

closed his eyes.

Outside, the waves broke against the island shore and the students in their white robes went once again through the motions of the silent kill.

Just over seven hundred miles away, the woman who had been so much in Alex's thoughts was examining a photograph. There was a single sheet of paper attached to it and both were stamped with the words TOP

SECRET in red. The woman knew what the photo meant. There was only one course of action open to her. But for once—and for her it really was a first—she was reluctant. She couldn't allow emotion to get in the way.

That was when mistakes were made, and in her line of work that could be disastrous. But even so...

Mrs Jones took off her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes. She had received the photograph and report a few minutes ago. Since then she had made two calls, hoping against hope that there might have been a mistake. But there could be no doubt. The evidence was right there in front of her. She reached out and pressed a button on her phone, then spoke.

"William—is Mr Blunt in his office?"

In an outer office her personal assistant, William Dearly, glanced at his computer screen. He was twenty-three, a Cambridge graduate; he was in a wheelchair. "He hasn't left the building yet, Mrs Jones."

"Any meetings?"

"Nothing scheduled."

"Right. I'm going there now."

It had to be done. Mrs Jones took the photograph and the typed sheet and walked down the corridor on the sixteenth floor of the building that pretended to be an international bank but which was in fact the headquarters of MI6 Special Operations. Alan Blunt was her immediate superior. She wondered how he would react to the news that Alex Rider had joined Scorpia.

Blunt's office was at the very end of the corridor with views overlooking Liverpool Street. Mrs Jones entered without knocking. There was no need. William would have rung to say she was coming. And sure enough, Blunt registered no surprise as she came in. Not that his round, strangely featureless face ever showed any emotion. He too had been reading a report, several centimetres thick. She could see he had made neat notes using a fountain pen and green ink for instant recognition.

"Yes?" he asked as she sat down.

"This just came in from SatInt. I thought you should see it." SatInt was satellite intelligence. She passed it across.

Mrs Jones watched Alan Blunt carefully as he read the single page. She had been his deputy for seven years and had worked with him for another ten before that. She had never been to his home. She had never met his wife.

But she probably knew him better than anyone in the building. And she was worried about him. Quite recently he had made a huge mistake, refusing to believe Alex when it came to that business with Damian Cray. As a result, Cray had come within minutes of destroying half the world. Blunt had been given a severe dressing down by the home secretary, but it wasn't just that he was finding hard to live with. It was the fact that he, the head of Special Operations, had been bettered by a fourteen-year-old-boy. Mrs Jones wondered how much longer he would stay.

Now he examined the photograph, his eyes unblinking behind his steel-framed spectacles. It showed two figures, a man and a boy, getting out of a boat. It had been taken above Malagosto and blown up many times.

Both faces were blurred.

"Alex Rider?" Blunt asked. There was a dead tone to his voice.

"The picture was taken by a spy satellite," Mrs Jones said. "But Smithers ran it through one of his computers and it's definitely him."

"Who is the man with him?"

"We think it could be a Scorpia agent called Nile. It's hard to tell. The photograph is black and white, but so is he. I've downloaded his details for you."

"Are we to infer that Rider has decided to switch sides?"

"I've spoken to his housekeeper, the American girl ... Jack Starbright. It seems that Alex disappeared four days ago from a school trip to Venice."

"Disappeared where?"

"She didn't know. It's very surprising that he hasn't been in touch with her. She's his closest friend."

"Is it possible that the boy has somehow become involved with Scorpia and has been taken by force?"

"I'd like to believe it." Mrs Jones sighed. It couldn't be avoided any longer. "But there was always a chance that Yassen Gregorovich managed to speak to Alex before he died. When I met Alex after the Cray business, I knew something was wrong. I think Yassen must have told him about John Rider."

"Albert Bridge."

"Yes."

"That's very unfortunate."

There was a long silence. Mrs Jones knew that Blunt would be turning over a dozen possibilities in his mind, considering and eliminating each one in a matter of seconds. She had never met anyone with such an analytical brain.

“Scorpia haven’t been very active recently,” he said.

“It’s true. They’ve been very quiet. We think they may have been involved in a piece of sabotage at Consanto Enterprises, near Amalfi, yesterday evening.”

“The biomedical people?”

“Yes. We’ve only just received the reports and we’re looking into them. There may be a link.”

“If Scorpia have turned Alex, they’ll use him against us.”

“I know.”

Blunt took a last look at the photograph. “This is Malagosto,” he said. “And that means he isn’t their prisoner.

They’re training him. I think we should step up your security rating with immediate effect.”

“And yours?”

“I wasn’t on Albert Bridge.” He laid the photograph down. “I want all local agents in Venice placed on immediate alert, and we’d better contact airports and all points of entry into the UK. I want Alex Rider brought in.”

“Unharmd.” The single word was spoken as a challenge.

Blunt looked at her with empty eyes. “Whatever it takes.”

Chapter 11: THE BELL TOWER

So tell me, Alex. What do you see?" Alex was sitting in a leather chair in a plain, whitewashed room at the back of the monastery. He was on one side of a desk, facing a smiling middle-aged man who sat on the other. The man's name was Dr Karl Steiner and, although he spoke with a slight German accent, he had come to the island from South Africa. He was a psychiatrist and looked it—with silver-framed glasses, thinning hair and eyes that were always more inquisitive than friendly. Dr Steiner was holding a white card with a black shape on it. The shape looked like nothing at all; it was just a series of blobs. But Alex was meant to be able to interpret it.

He thought for a moment. He knew that this was called a Rorschach test; he had seen it once in a film. He supposed it must be important. But he wasn't sure that he saw anything in particular on the card. Eventually he spoke.

"I suppose it's a man flying through the sky," he suggested. "He's wearing a backpack."

"That's excellent. Very good!" Dr Steiner put the card down and picked up another. "How about this one?"

The second shape was easier. "It's a football being pumped up," Alex said.

"Good, thank you."

Dr Steiner laid the second card down and there was a brief silence in the office. Outside, Alex could hear gunfire. The other students were down on the shooting range. But there was no view of the range out of the window. Perhaps the psychiatrist had chosen this room for that reason.

"So how are you settling in?" Dr Steiner asked.

Alex shrugged. "OK."

"You have no anxieties? Nothing you wish to discuss?"

"No. I'm fine, thank you, Dr Steiner."

"Good. That's good." The psychiatrist seemed determined to be positive. Alex wondered if the interview was over, but then the man opened a file. "I have your medical report here," he said.

For a moment Alex was nervous. He had been physically examined on his first day on the island. Stripped down to his underwear, he had been put through a whole series of tests by an Italian nurse who spoke little English. Blood and urine samples had been taken, his blood pressure and pulse measured, his sight, hearing and reflexes checked. He wondered now if they had found something wrong.

But Dr Steiner was still smiling. "You're in very good shape, Alex," he commented. "I'm glad you've been looking after yourself. Not too much fast food. No cigarettes. Very sensible."

He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a hypodermic syringe and a little bottle. As Alex watched, he inserted the needle into the bottle and filled the syringe.

"What's that?" Alex asked.

"According to your medical report, you're a little run-down. I suppose it's to be expected after all you've been through. And I'm sure it's very demanding, being here on this island. The nurse has suggested a vitamin booster. That's all this is." He held the needle up to the light and squirted a little of the amber-coloured liquid out of the tip. "Would you mind rolling up your sleeve?"

Alex hesitated. "I thought you were a psychiatrist," he said.

"I'm perfectly qualified to give you an injection," Dr Steiner said. He raised an accusing finger. "You're not going to tell me you're afraid of a little prick?"

"I wouldn't call you that," Alex muttered. He rolled up his left sleeve.

Two minutes later, he was back outside.

He had been missing gun practice because of his medical appointment and he joined the other students on the firing range. This was on the western side of the island—the side that faced away from Venice. Although Scorpia were legally permitted to be on Malagosto, they hadn't wanted to draw attention to themselves with the sound of gunfire, and the woodland provided a natural screen. There was a strip of the island that was long and flat with nothing growing apart from wild grasses, and the school had built a cut-out town, with offices and shops that were nothing more than fronts, like a film set. Alex had already been through it twice, using a handgun to shoot at paper targets—black rings with a red bull's-eye—that popped up in the windows and doors.

Gordon Ross, the ginger-haired technical specialist who seemed to have picked up most of his skills in Scotland's tougher jails, was in charge of the shooting range. He nodded as Alex approached.

"Good afternoon, Mr Rider. How was your visit to the shrink? Did he tell you you're mad? If not, I wonder what the hell you're doing here!"

A number of other students stood around him, unloading and adjusting their weapons. Alex knew all of them by now. There was Klaus, a German mercenary who had trained with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Walker, who had spent five years with the CIA in Washington before deciding he could

earn more working for the other side.

One of the two women there had become quite close to Alex, and he wondered if she had been specially chosen to look after him. Her name was Amanda and she had been a soldier with the Israeli army in the occupied Gaza Strip. Seeing him, she raised a hand in greeting. She seemed genuinely pleased to see him.

But then they all did. That was the strange thing. He had been accepted into the day-to-day life of Malagosto without any problem. That in itself was remarkable. Alex remembered the time MI6 had sent him for training with the SAS in Wales. He had been an outsider from the day he arrived, unwanted and unwelcome, a child in an adult world. He was by far the youngest person here too, but that didn't seem to matter. Quite the opposite.

He was accepted and even admired by the other students. He was John Rider's son. Everyone knew what that meant.

"You're just in time to show us what you can do before lunch," Gordon Ross announced. His Scottish accent made almost everything sound like a challenge. "You got a high score the day before yesterday. In fact, you were second in the class. Let's see if you can do even better today. But this time I may have built in a little surprise!"

He handed Alex a gun, a Belgian-made FN semiautomatic pistol. Alex weighed it in his hand, trying to find the balance between himself and his weapon. Ross had explained that this was essential to the technique he called instinctive firing.

"Remember—you have to shoot instantly. You can't stop to take aim. If you do, you're dead. In a real combat situation you don't have time to mess around. You and the gun are one. And if you believe that you can hit the target, you will hit the target. That's what instinctive firing is all about."

Now Alex stepped forward, the gun at his side, watching the mocked-up doors and windows in front of him. He knew there would be no warning. At any time, a target could appear. He would be expected to turn and fire.

He waited. He was aware of the other students watching him. Out of the corner of his eye he could just make out the shape of Gordon Ross. Was the teacher smiling?

A sudden movement.

A target had appeared in an upper window and immediately Alex saw that the bull's-eye targets with their impersonal rings had been replaced. A photograph had appeared instead. It was a life-sized colour picture of a young man. Alex didn't know who he was—but that didn't matter. He was a target.

There was no time to hesitate.

Alex raised the gun and fired.

Later that day, Oliver d'Arc, the principal of Scorpio's Training and Assessment Centre, sat in his office on Malagosto, talking to Julia Rothman. Her image filled the screen of the laptop computer on his desk. There was a webcam perched on a shelf and his own image would be appearing simultaneously somewhere in the Widow's Palace just across the water, in Venice. Mrs Rothman never came to the island. She knew it was under surveillance by both the American and British intelligence services, and one day they might be tempted to target the island with a non-nuclear ballistic missile. It was too dangerous.

It was only the second occasion they had spoken since Alex had arrived. The time was exactly seven o'clock in the evening. Outside, the sun had begun to set.

"How is he progressing?" Mrs Rothman asked. Her own webcam didn't flatter her; her face on the screen looked cold and a little colourless.

D'Arc considered. He ran a thumb and a single finger down the sides of his chin, stroking his beard. "The boy is certainly exceptional," he murmured. "Of course, his uncle, Ian Rider, trained him all his life, almost from the moment he could walk. I have to say, he did a good job."

"And?"

"He is very intelligent. Quick-witted. Everyone here genuinely likes him. Unfortunately, though, I have my doubts about his usefulness to us."

"I am very sorry to hear that, Professor d'Arc. Please explain."

"I will give you two examples, Mrs Rothman. Today Alex returned to the shooting range. We've been putting him through a course of instinctive firing. It's something he's never done before and, I have to say, it takes many of our students several weeks to master the art. After just a few hours on the range, Alex was already achieving impressive results. At the end of his second day he scored seventy-two per cent."

"I don't see anything wrong with that." D'Arc shifted in his seat. In his formal suit and tie, shrunk to fit Mrs Rothman's computer screen, he looked rather like a ventriloquist's dummy. "Today we switched the targets," he explained. "Instead of black and red rings, Alex was asked to fire at photographs of men and women. He was supposed to aim at the vital areas: the heart ... between the eyes."

"How did he do?"

"That's the point. His score dropped to forty-six per cent. He missed several targets altogether." D'Arc took off his glasses and polished them with a cloth. "I also have the results of his Rorschach psychological test," he went on. "He was asked to identify certain shapes—"

"I do know what a Rorschach test is, Professor."

"Of course. Forgive me. Well, there was one shape that every student who has ever come here has identified as a man lying in a pool of blood. But not Alex. He said he thought it was a man flying through the air with a backpack. Another shape, which is invariably seen as a gun pointing at someone's head, he believed to be someone pumping up a football. At our very first meeting, Alex told me that he couldn't kill for us, and I have to say that, psychologically speaking, he seems to lack what might be called the killer instinct."

There was a long pause. The image on the computer screen flickered.

"It's very disappointing," d'Arc went on. "Having met Alex, I must say that a teenage assassin would be extremely useful to us. The possibilities are almost limitless. I think we should make it a high priority to find one of our own."

"I doubt there are many teenagers quite as experienced as Alex."

"That's what I began by saying. But even so..."

There was another pause. Mrs Rothman came to a decision. "Did Alex see Dr Steiner?" she asked.

"Yes. Everything was done exactly as you instructed."

"Good." She nodded. "You say that Alex won't kill for us, but you could still be proved wrong. It's just a question of giving him the right target—and this time I'm not talking about paper."

"You want to send him on an assignment?"

"As you know, Invisible Sword is about to enter its final, critical phase. Introducing Alex Rider into the mix right now might provide an interesting distraction, at the very least. And if he did succeed, which I believe he might, he could be very useful indeed. All in all, the timing couldn't be better."

Julia Rothman leant forward so that her eyes almost filled the screen.

"This is what I want you to do..."

There were two hundred and forty-seven steps to the top of the bell tower. Alex knew because he had counted every one of them. The bottom of the tower was empty, a single chamber with bare brick walls and a smell of damp. It had clearly been abandoned years ago. The bells themselves either had been stolen or had fallen down and been lost. The stairs were made of stone and twisted round, following the edges of the tower, and small windows allowed just enough light to see. There was a door at the top. Alex wondered if it would be locked.

The tower was used occasionally during camouflage exercises, when the students had to creep from one side of the island to the other. It was a useful lookout post. But he hadn't been up here before himself.

The door was open. It led to a square platform, about ten metres wide, out in the open air. Once there might have been a balustrade enclosing the platform and making it safe. But at some point it had been removed and now the stone floor simply ended. If Alex took three more paces he would step into nothing. He would fall to his death.

Cautiously Alex walked to the edge and glanced down. He was right above the monastery courtyard. He could see the makiwara which had been set up earlier in the afternoon. This was a heavy pole with a thick leather pad wrapped around it at head height. It was used to practise kick-boxing and karate strikes. There was nobody in sight. Lessons for the day had ended and the other students were resting before dinner.

He looked across the woodland that surrounded the monastery, already dark and impenetrable. The sun was sinking into the sea, spilling the last of its light over the black water. In the distance he could see the twinkling lights of Venice. What was happening there right now? Tourists would be leaving their hotels, searching out the restaurants and bars. There might be concerts in some of the churches. The gondoliers would be tying up their boats. Winter might be a long way off but already it was too cold for most people to set out on an evening cruise. Alex still found it hard to believe that this island with all its secrets could exist so close to one of the world's most popular holiday destinations. Two worlds. Side by side. But one of them was blind, utterly unaware of the existence of the other.

He stood there unmoving, feeling the breeze rippling through his hair. He was wearing only a long-sleeved shirt and jeans and he was conscious of the evening chill. But somehow it was distant. It was as if he had become part of the tower—a statue or a gargoyle. He was on Malagosto because he had nowhere else to go; he no longer had any choice.

He thought back over the last couple of weeks. How long had he been on the island? He had no idea. In many ways it was just like being at school. There were teachers and classrooms and separate lessons, and one day more or less blurred into the next. Only the subjects here were nothing like the ones he had studied at Brookland.

First there was history—also taught by Gordon Ross. But his version of history had nothing to do with kings and queens, battles and treaties. Ross specialized in the history of weapons.

"Now, this is the double-edged commando knife, developed in the Second World War by Fairbairn and Sykes.

One was a silent killing specialist, the other a crack shot with the rifle. Isn't it a beauty? You'll see it has a seven and a half inch blade with a crosspiece and a ribbed centre on both sides. It's designed to fit exactly in your palm. You may find it a little heavy, Alex, as your hand isn't fully developed. But this is still the greatest murder weapon ever invented. Guns are noisy; guns can jam. But the commando knife is a true friend. It will do its job instantly and it will never let you down."

Then there were practical lessons with Professor Yermalov. As Nile had said, he was the least friendly member of the staff at Malagosto: a scowling, silent man in his fifties who had little time for anyone. But Alex soon found out why. Yermalov was from Chechnya and had lost his entire family in the war with Russia.

"Today I am going to show you how to make yourself invisible," he said.

Alex couldn't resist a faint smile.

Yermalov saw it. "You think I am making a joke with you, Mr Rider? You think I am talking about children's books? A cloak of invisibility, perhaps? You are wrong. I am teaching you the skills of the ninjas, the greatest spies who ever lived. The ninja assassins of feudal Japan were reputed to have the ability to vanish into thin air.

In fact they used the five elements of escape and concealment—the gotonpo. Not magic but science. They might hide underwater, breathing through a tube. They might bury themselves a few centimetres below the surface of the earth. Wearing protective clothing, they might hide inside a

fire. To vanish into the air, they carried a rope or even a hidden ladder. And there were other possibilities. They developed the art of sight removers or eye blinders. Blind your enemy with smoke or chemicals and you will become invisible. That is what I will show you now, and this afternoon Miss Binnag will be demonstrating how to make a blinding powder from hot peppers...”

There had been other exercises too. How to assemble and dismantle an automatic pistol while blindfolded (Alex had dropped all the pieces, much to the amusement of the other students). How to use fear. How to use surprise.

How to target aggression. There were textbooks—including a manual on the most vulnerable parts of the human body, written by a Dr Three—as well as blackboards and even written exams. They sat in classrooms with ordinary desks. There was just one difference. This was a school for assassination.

And then there had been the demonstration. It was something Alex would never forget.

One afternoon the students had assembled in the main courtyard, where Oliver d’Arc was standing with Nile, who was dressed in white judo robes with a black belt around his waist. It was odd how often the two colours seemed to surround him, as if perpetually mocking his disease.

“Nile was one of our best students,” d’Arc explained. “Since his time here, he has risen up the ranks of Scorpia with successful assignments in Washington, London, Bangkok, Sydney—all over the world, in fact. He has kindly agreed to show you a few of his techniques. I’m sure you’ll all learn something from him.” He bowed.

“Thank you, Nile.”

In the next thirty minutes, Alex saw a display of strength, agility and fitness he would never forget. Nile smashed bricks and planks with his elbows, fists and bare feet. Three students with long wooden staffs closed in on him. Unarmed, he beat them all, weaving in and out, moving so fast that at times his hands were no more than a blur. Then he proceeded to demonstrate a variety of ninja weapons: knives, swords, spears and chains.

Alex watched him throw a dozen him shuriken at a wooden target. These were the deadly, star-shaped projectiles that spun through the air, each steel point razor sharp. One after another they thudded into the wood, hitting the inner circle. Nile never missed. And this was a man with some sort of secret weakness? Alex couldn’t see it—and he understood now how he had been defeated so easily at the Widow’s Palace. Against a man like Nile he wouldn’t stand a chance.

But they were on the same side.

Alex reminded himself of that now as he stood at the top of the bell tower, watching the night draw in and darkness take hold. He had made his choice. He was part of Scorpia now.

Like his father.

Had he made the right decision? At the time, it had all seemed very simple. Yassen Gregorovich had told the truth; Mrs Rothman had shown it to him on film. But he still wasn’t sure. There was a voice whispering to him in the evening breeze that this was all a terrible mistake, that he shouldn’t be here, that it wasn’t too late to get away. But where would he go? How could he return to England, knowing what he did? Albert Bridge. He couldn’t erase the images from his mind. The three Scorpia agents waiting. Mrs Jones talking into the radio transmitter. The betrayal. John Rider pitching forward and lying still.

Alex felt hatred welling up inside him. It was stronger than anything he had ever experienced in his life. He wondered if it would be possible to live an ordinary life again one day. There seemed to be nowhere for him to go. Maybe it would be better for everyone if he just took one more step. He was already standing on the very edge. Why couldn’t he just let the night take him?

“Alex?”

He hadn’t heard anyone approach. He looked round and saw Nile standing in the doorway, one hand resting against the frame.

“I’ve been looking for you, Alex. What are you doing?”

“I was just thinking.”

“Professor Yermalov said he thought he saw you come up here. You shouldn’t really be here.”

Alex expected Nile to come forward, but he stayed where he was.

“I just wanted to be alone,” Alex explained.

“I think you should come down. You could fall.”

Alex hesitated. Then he nodded. “All right.”

He followed Nile back down the twisting staircase and at last they emerged at ground level.

“Professor d’Arc wants to see you,” Nile said.

“To fail me?”

“What gave you that idea? You’ve done extremely well. Everyone is very pleased with you. You’ve been here less than a fortnight but you’ve already made great progress.”

They walked back together. A couple of students passed them and murmured a greeting. Only the day before, Alex had seen them fight a ferocious duel with fencing swords. They were deadly killers; they were his friends.

He shook his head and followed Nile into the monastery and through to d’Arc’s study.

As usual, the principal was sitting behind his desk. He was looking as neat as ever, his beard perfectly trimmed.

“Do, please, sit down, Alex,” he said. He tapped a few keys on his computer and glanced at the screen through his gold-rimmed spectacles. “I have some of your results here,” he went on. “You’ll be pleased to know that all the teachers speak very highly of you.” He frowned. “We do have one small problem, however. Your psychological profile…”

Alex said nothing.

“This business of killing,” d’Arc said. “I heard what you said when you first came to my office and, as I told you, there are many other things you could do for Scorpia. But here’s the problem, my dear boy. You’re afraid of killing, so you’re afraid of Scorpia. You are not quite one of us—and I fear you never will be. That is not satisfactory.”

“Are you asking me to leave?”

“Not at all. I’m asking you only to trust us a little more. I’m searching for a way to make you feel that you belong with us completely. And I think I have the answer.”

D’Arc switched off his computer and walked round from behind the desk. He was dressed in another suit—he wore a different suit every day. This one was brown, with a herringbone pattern.

“You have to learn to kill,” he said suddenly. “You have to do it without any hesitation. Because, when you’ve done it once, you’ll see that actually it wasn’t such a big deal. It’s the same as jumping into a swimming pool.

As easy as that. But you have to cross the psychological barrier, Alex, if you are to become one of us.” He raised a hand. “I know you are very young; I know this isn’t easy. But I want to help you. I want to make it less painful for you. And I think I can.

“I am going to send you to England tomorrow. That same evening you will carry out your first mission for Scorpia and, if you succeed, there will be no going back. You will know that you are truly one of us and we will know that we can trust you. But here is the good news.” D’Arc smiled, showing teeth that didn’t look quite real.

“We have chosen the one person in the world who—we think you’ll agree—most deserves to die. It is someone you have every reason to despise, and we hope that your hatred and your anger will drive you on, removing any last doubts you may have.

“Mrs Jones. The deputy head of MI6 Special Operations. She was the one responsible for the death of your father.

“We know where she lives; we will help you get to her. She is the one we want you to kill.”

Chapter 12: DEAR PRIME MINISTER...

Just before four o'clock in the afternoon, a man got out of a taxi in Whitehall, paid with a brand-new twenty-pound note, and began to walk the short distance to Downing Street. The man had started his journey at Paddington, but that wasn't where he lived. Nor had he come into London on a train. He was about thirty years old with short, fair hair, and he was wearing a suit and tie.

It is not possible to walk into Downing Street, not since Margaret Thatcher erected huge anti-terrorist gates.

Britain is the only democracy whose leaders feel the need to hide behind bars. As always, there was a policeman there, just coming to the end of his eight-hour shift.

The man walked up to him, at the same time producing a plain white envelope made from the very finest paper.

Later, when the envelope was analysed, it would be found to have come from a supplier in Naples. There would be no fingerprints, even though the man who had delivered it was not wearing gloves. He had no fingerprints: they had been surgically removed.

"Good afternoon," he said. He had no accent of any kind. His voice was pleasant and polite.

"Good afternoon, sir."

"I have a letter for the prime minister."

The policeman had heard it a hundred times. There were cranks and pressure groups, people with grievances, people needing help. Often they came here with letters and petitions, hoping they would reach the prime minister's desk. The policeman was friendly. As he was trained to be.

"Thank you, sir. If you'd like to leave it with me, I'll see it goes through."

The policeman took the letter—and his would be the only fingerprints that would show up later. Written on the front of the envelope in neat, flowing handwriting were the words: For the attention of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, First Lord of the Treasury, 10 Downing Street. He carried it into the long, narrow office which is little more than a Portakabin and which all members of the public must pass through before they can enter the famous street. This was as close as the letter would normally get to number ten. It would be re-routed to an office where a secretary—one of many—would open and read it. If necessary, it might be passed on to the appropriate department. More likely, after a few weeks, the sender would receive a standard, word-processed reply.

This letter was different.

When the duty officer received it, he turned it over, and that was when he saw the silver scorpion embossed on the other side. There are many symbols and code words used by criminal and terrorist organizations. They are designed to make themselves instantly identifiable so that the authorities will treat them seriously. The duty officer knew at once that he was holding a communication from Scorpia, and pressed the panic button, alerting half a dozen policemen outside.

"Who delivered this?" he demanded.

"It was just someone..." The policeman was old and approaching the end of his career. After today, that end would be considerably nearer. "He was young. Fair-haired. Wearing a suit."

"Get out there and see if you can find him."

But it was too late. Seconds after the man in the suit had delivered the letter, another taxi had drawn up and he had got in. This taxi was not in fact licensed and its number plate was fake. After less than half a mile the man had got out again, disappearing into the crowds pouring out of Charing Cross Station. His hair was now dark brown; he had discarded his jacket and was wearing sunglasses. He would never be seen again.

By five thirty that evening the letter had been photographed, the paper analysed, the envelope checked for any trace of biochemical agents. The prime minister was not in the country. He had gone to Mexico City to join other world leaders at a summit meeting about the environment. He had been in the middle of a photo session but had been called outside and told about the letter. Already he was on his way home.

Meanwhile, two men were sitting in his private office. One was the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office.

The other was the director of communications. They each had a copy of the letter—three typewritten sheets, unsigned—in front of them.

This was what they had read:

Dear Prime Minister,

It is with regret that we must inform you that we are about to bring terror to your country.

We are acting on the instructions of an overseas client who wishes to make certain adjustments to the balance of world power. He makes four demands:

1. The Americans must withdraw all their troops and secret service personnel from every country around the world. Never again will the Americans act as international policemen.
2. The Americans must announce their intention to destroy their entire nuclear weapons programme as well as their long-range conventional

weapons systems. We will allow six months for this process to be put into effect and completed. By the end of that time, the United States must have disarmed.

3. The sum of one billion dollars must be paid to the World Bank, this money to be used to rebuild poor countries and countries damaged by recent wars.

4. The president of the United States must resign immediately.

Prime Minister, you may wonder why this letter is addressed to you when our demands are directed entirely at the American government.

The reason for this is simple. You are the Americans' best friend. You have always supported their foreign policy. Now it is time to see if they will be as loyal to you as you have been to them.

Should they fail, it is you who will pay the price.

We will wait two days. To be more precise, we are prepared to give you forty-eight hours, starting from the moment this letter was delivered. During this time, we expect to hear the president of the United States agree to our terms.

If he fails to do so, we will inflict a terrible punishment on the people of Britain.

We must inform you, Prime Minister, that we have developed a new weapon which we have called Invisible Sword. This weapon is now primed and operational. If the president of the United States chooses not to respond to all four of our demands in the allotted time, then—at exactly four o'clock on Thursday afternoon—many thousands of schoolchildren in London will die. Let me assure you, most sincerely, that this cannot be avoided. The technology is in place; the targets have been selected. This is not a hollow threat.

Even so, we understand that you may doubt the power of Invisible Sword.

We have therefore arranged a demonstration. This evening the England reserve football squad will be returning to Britain from Nigeria, where they have been playing a number of exhibition games.

When you read this letter, they will already be in the air. They are due to arrive at Heathrow Airport at five minutes past seven.

At exactly seven fifteen, all eighteen members of this squad, including the coaches, will be killed.

You cannot save them; you cannot protect them: you can only watch. We hope, by this action, you will understand that we are to be taken seriously and thus you will act quickly to persuade the Americans to comply. By doing so, you will avoid the terrible and pointless massacre of so many of your young people.

We have taken the liberty of forwarding a copy of this letter to the American ambassador in London. We will be watching the news channels on television, where we will be expecting an announcement to be made. You will receive no further communication from us. We repeat: these demands cannot be negotiated. The countdown has already begun.

Yours faithfully,

SCORPIA

There was a long silence, broken only by the ticking of an antique clock, as both men studied the letter for a fourth and then a fifth time. Each was aware of the other, wondering how he would react. The two men could not have been more different. Nor could they have disliked each other more.

Sir Graham Adair had been a civil servant for as long as anyone could remember, not part of any government but always serving it, advising it and (some people said) controlling it. He was now in his sixties and had silvery-grey hair and a face accustomed to disguising its emotions. He was dressed, as always, in a dark, old-fashioned suit. He was the sort of man who was sparing in his movements and who never said anything until he had thoroughly considered it first. He had worked with six prime ministers in his lifetime and had different opinions about them all. But he had never told anyone, not even his wife, his innermost thoughts. He was the perfect public servant. One of the most powerful people in the country, he was delighted that very few people knew his name.

The director of communications hadn't even been born when Sir Graham had first entered Downing Street.

Mark Kellner was one of the many "special advisers" with whom the prime minister liked to surround himself

—and he was also the most influential. He had been at university—studying politics and economics—with the prime minister's wife. For a time he had worked in television, until he had been invited to try his luck in the corridors of power. He was a small, thin man with glasses and too much curly hair. He was also wearing a suit, and there was dandruff on his shoulders.

It was Kellner who broke the silence with a single four-letter word. Sir Graham glanced at him. He never used that sort of language himself.

"You don't believe any of this rubbish, do you?" Kellner demanded.

"This letter came from Scorpia," Sir Graham replied. "I have had direct dealings with them in the past, and I have to tell you that they're not known to make idle threats."

"You accept that they've invented some sort of secret weapon? An invisible sword?" Mark Kellner couldn't hide the scorn in his voice. "So what's going to happen? They're going to wave some sort of magic wand and everyone's going to fall down dead?"

"As I've already said, Mr Kellner, in my opinion Scorpia would not have sent this letter if they did not have the means to back it up. They are probably the most dangerous criminal organization in the world. Bigger than the Mafia, more ruthless than the triads."

"But you tell me: what sort of weapon could target children? Thousands of schoolchildren—that's what they say. So what are they going to do? Set off some sort of dirty bomb in the playground? Or maybe they're going to go round schools with hand grenades!"

They say the weapon is primed and operational.”

“The weapon doesn’t exist!” Kellner slammed his hand down on his copy of the letter. “And even if it did, these demands are ridiculous. The American president is not going to resign. His popularity ratings have never been better. And as for this suggestion that the Americans dismantle their weapons systems—do Scorpia really think for a single minute that they’ll even consider it? The Americans love weapons! They’ve got more weapons than just about anyone else in the world. We show this letter to the president, and he’ll laugh at us.”

“MI6 aren’t prepared to rule out the possibility that the weapon exists.”

“You’ve spoken to them?”

“I had a telephone conversation with Alan Blunt earlier this evening. I have also sent him a copy of the letter.

He believes, like me, that we should treat this matter with the utmost seriousness.”

“The prime minister has cut short his visit to Mexico,” Kellner muttered. “He’s flying home as we speak. You don’t get much more serious than that!”

“I’m sure we’re all grateful to the prime minister for interrupting his conference,” Sir Graham retorted drily.

“But I would have said it’s the aircraft carrying these football players that we should be considering. I’ve also spoken to British Airways. Flight 0074 was delayed in Lagos earlier today and only left this afternoon, just before half past twelve our time. It should be touching down at Heathrow at five past seven, just like the letter says. And the England reserve football squad are on board.”

“So what are you suggesting we do?” Kellner demanded.

“It’s very simple. The threat to the plane is at Heathrow. Scorpia’s helped us at least by giving us the place and the time. We must therefore re-route the plane at once. It can land at Birmingham or Manchester. Our first priority is to make sure the players are safe.”

“I’m afraid I don’t agree.”

Sir Graham Adair glanced at the director of communications, his eyes filled with an icy contempt. He had spoken at length with Alan Blunt. Both of them had been expecting this.

“Let me tell you my way of thinking,” Kellner continued. He held his two index fingers in the air, as if to frame what he had to say. “I know you’re scared of Scorpia; you’ve made that much clear. Well, I’ve read their demands and personally I think they’re a bunch of idiots. But either way, they’ve given us a chance to call their bluff. Redirecting this football team is the last thing we want to do. We can use the arrival of the plane to test this so-called Invisible Sword. And by sixteen minutes past seven we’ll know it doesn’t exist and we can put Scorpia’s letter where it deserves to be—in the bin!”

“You’re willing to risk the lives of the players?”

“There is no risk. We’ll throw a security blanket around Heathrow Airport, making it impossible for anyone to get near them. The letter states that the players are going to be hit at exactly seven fifteen. We can find out exactly who’s on the plane. Then we can make sure that there are a hundred armed soldiers surrounding it when it lands. Scorpia can bring out their weapon and we’ll see exactly what it is and how it works. Anyone tries to set foot in the airport, we’ll arrest them and throw them in jail. End of story; end of threat.”

“And how are you going to put a hundred extra armed guards into Heathrow Airport?” Sir Graham asked.

“You’ll start a national panic.”

Kellner grinned. “You think I can’t make up some sort of spin to take care of that? I’ll say it’s a training exercise. Nobody’ll even blink.”

The permanent secretary sighed. There were times when he wondered if he wasn’t getting too old for this sort of work—and this was definitely one of them. There remained one final question. But he already knew the answer.

“Have you put this to the prime minister?” he asked.

“Yes. While you were speaking to MI6, I was talking to him. And he agrees with me. So I’m afraid on this matter you’re overruled, Sir Graham.”

“He’s aware of the risks?”

“We don’t believe there are any risks, actually. But it’s really very simple. If we don’t act now, we’ll lose the chance to see this weapon in action. If we do this my way, we force Scorpia to show their hand.”

Sir Graham Adair stood up. “There doesn’t seem to be anything more to discuss,” he said.

“You’d better get on to MI6.”

“Of course.” Sir Graham moved to the door. He stopped and turned round. “And what happens if you’re wrong?” he enquired. “What happens if these players do somehow get killed?”

Kellner shrugged. “At least we’ll know what we’re dealing with,” he said. “And they lost every single one of their games while they were in Nigeria. I’m sure we can put together another team.”

The plane landing at Heathrow was a Boeing 747—flight number BA 0074 from Lagos. It had been in the air for six hours and thirty-five minutes. It had departed late. There had been a seemingly endless delay in Lagos: some sort of technical fault. Scorpia had arranged that, of course. It was important the plane followed the schedule that they had imposed. It had to land by five past seven. In fact it hit the runway at five minutes to.

The eighteen members of the football squad were sitting in business class. They were blank-faced and bleary-eyed, not just from the long flight but from the series of defeats they had left behind them. The tour had been a disaster from start to finish. These were only exhibition games. The results weren’t meant to matter, but the trip had been something of a humiliation.

As they gazed out of the windows, looking at the grey light and the grey tarmac of a Heathrow twilight, the captain's voice came over the intercom.

"Well, good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Heathrow. Once again, I'm sorry for the late running of this aircraft. I'm afraid I've just spoken to the control tower and for some reason we're being re-routed away from the main terminal, so we're going to be out here a little longer. Please remain in your seats with your seat belts fastened, and we'll have you out of here as soon as we possibly can."

And here was something strange. As the plane taxied forward, two army jeeps appeared from nowhere, one on each side, escorting them along the runway. There were soldiers with machine guns in the back. Following instructions from the control tower, the plane turned off and began to move away from the main buildings. The two jeeps accompanied it.

Alan Blunt stood behind an observation window, watching the 747 through a pair of miniature binoculars. He didn't move as the plane trundled towards a square concrete holding area. When he lowered the binoculars, his eyes still remained fixed on the distance. He hadn't spoken for several minutes; he'd barely even breathed.

There is nothing more dangerous than a government that does not trust its own intelligence and security services. Unfortunately, as Blunt was only too well aware, the prime minister had made his dislike of both MI5

and MI6 clear almost from the first day he had come to power. This was the result.

"So what now?" Sir Graham Adair was standing next to him. The permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office knew Alan Blunt very well. They met once a month, formally, to discuss intelligence matters. But they were also members of the same club and occasionally played bridge together. Now he was watching the sky and the runway as if expecting to see a missile streaking towards the slowly moving plane.

"We are about to watch eighteen people die."

"Kellner is a bloody fool, but even so I can't see how they're going to do it." Sir Graham didn't want to believe him. "The airport has been sealed off since six. We've trebled the security. Everyone is on the highest possible alert. You looked at the passenger list?"

Blunt knew just about everything about every man, woman and child who had boarded the plane in Lagos.

Hundreds of agents had spent the past hour checking and cross-checking their details, looking for anything remotely suspicious. If there were assassins or terrorists on the plane, they would have to be under deep cover.

At the same time, the pilots and cabin staff had been alerted to look out for anything amiss. If anyone so much as stood up before the squad had disembarked, they would raise the alarm.

"Of course we did," Blunt said irritably.

"And?"

"Tourists. Businessmen. Families. Two weather forecasters and a celebrity chef. Nobody seems to have any understanding of what we're up against."

"Tell me."

"Scorpiia will do what they said they would do: it's as simple as that. They never fail."

"They may not find it so easy this time." Sir Graham looked at his watch. It was nine minutes past seven. "It's still possible they made a mistake warning us."

"They only warned you because they knew there was nothing you could do."

The plane came to a halt with the two jeeps on either side. At the same time, more armed soldiers appeared.

They were everywhere. Some were in clusters on the ground, watching the plane through the telescopic sights of their automatic weapons. There were snipers dotted about on the roofs, all of them linked by radio. Armed policemen with sniffer dogs waited at the entrance to the main terminal. Every door was guarded. Nobody was being allowed in or out.

Sixty more seconds had passed. There were just five minutes to the deadline: quarter past seven.

On the plane the captain switched off the engines. Normally the passengers would already be standing up, reaching for their bags, anxious to leave. But by now they all knew something was wrong. The plane seemed to have stopped in the middle of nowhere. Powerful spotlights had been trained on it, as if pinning it down. There was no tunnel connecting the door with the terminal. A vehicle edged slowly forward, bringing with it a flight of steps. Armed soldiers in khaki uniforms with helmets and visors crept along beside it. Whatever window the passengers looked out of, they could see armed forces totally surrounding the plane.

The captain spoke again, his voice deliberately calm and matter-of-fact.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, it seems we have a situation here at Heathrow, but the control tower assures me that it's all routine ... there's nothing to worry about. We're going to be opening the main door in a moment, but I must ask you to remain in your seats until you're given instructions to leave. We're going to be disembarking our passengers in business class first, starting with those in rows seven to nine. The rest of you will be allowed to leave very shortly. Please can I ask for your patience for just a few minutes more."

Rows seven to nine. The captain had already been told. These were the rows occupied by the football squad.

None of the players had been informed of what was happening.

There were four minutes left.

The players stood up and began to collect their hand luggage, a variety of sports bags and souvenirs: brightly coloured clothes and wooden carvings. They were glad they had been chosen to leave first. Some of them were thinking that it was all quite fun.

The steps connected with the side of the plane and Blunt watched as a man in orange overalls ran up to stand next to the door. The man looked like an airport technician but in fact he worked for MI6. A dozen soldiers sprinted forward and formed a circle around the steps, their guns pointing outwards so that they resembled a human porcupine. Every angle was covered. The nearest building was more than fifty metres away.

At the same time, a bus appeared. The bus was one of two kept at Heathrow for exceptional circumstances such as this. It looked ordinary but its shell was made of reinforced steel and its windows were bulletproof. Blunt had been in charge of all these preparations, working with the police and airport authorities. As soon as all the players were on board, it would leave the airport, not bothering with customs or passport control. Fast cars were waiting on the other side of the perimeter fence. The players, two or three in each, would be whisked to a secret location in London. By then they would be safe.

Or so everyone hoped. Blunt alone was less sure.

"There's nothing," Sir Graham murmured. "There's nobody even close."

It was true. The area surrounding the plane was empty. There were maybe fifty soldiers and policemen in view.

But nobody else.

"Scorpia will have been expecting this."

"Maybe one of the soldiers..." Sir Graham hadn't thought of this until now—when it was too late.

"They've all been checked," Blunt said. "I went through the list personally."

"Then for heaven's sake—"

The door of the plane opened.

A stewardess appeared at the top of the steps, blinking nervously in the glare of the spotlights. Only now could she fully appreciate how serious the situation must be. It was as if the plane had landed in a battlefield. It was totally surrounded. There were men with guns everywhere.

The MI6 agent in the orange overalls spoke briefly with her and she went back inside. Then the first of the players appeared, a sports bag slung over his shoulder.

"That's Hill-Smith," Sir Graham said. "He's the team captain."

Blunt looked at his watch. It was fourteen minutes past seven.

Edmund Hill-Smith was dark-haired, a well-built man. He looked around him, obviously puzzled. He was followed by the other squad members. A black player in sunglasses. His name was Jackson Burke; he was the goalie. Then one of the strikers, a man with blond hair. He was holding a straw hat, something he must have bought in a Nigerian market. One by one they appeared in the doorway and began to walk down the stairs to the waiting bus.

Blunt said nothing. A tiny pulse was beating in his temple. All eighteen men were out in the open now. Sir Graham looked left and right. Where was the attack going to come from? There was nothing anybody could do.

Hill-Smith and Burke had already reached the bus. They were safely inside.

Blunt twisted his wrist. The seconds hand on his watch passed the twelve.

One of the players, the last to leave the plane, seemed to stumble. Sir Graham saw one of the soldiers turn, alarmed. On the bus Burke suddenly jerked backwards, his shoulders slamming into the glass. Another player, halfway down the stairs, dropped his bag and clutched his chest, his face distorted with pain. He toppled over, knocking into the two men in front of him. But they too appeared to have been gripped by some invisible force...

One after another the players crumpled. The soldiers were shouting, gesticulating. What was happening was impossible. There was no enemy. Nobody had done anything. But eighteen healthy athletes were collapsing in front of their eyes. Sir Graham saw one of the soldiers speaking frantically into a radio transmitter and a second later a fleet of ambulances appeared, lights blazing, speeding towards the plane. So somebody had been prepared for the worst. Sir Graham glanced at Blunt and knew it had been him.

The ambulances were already too late. By the time they arrived, Burke was on his back, gasping his last few breaths. Hill-Smith had joined him, dropping to the floor of the bus, his lips mauve, his eyes empty. The steps were strewn with bodies, one or two feebly kicking, the others deadly still. The man with the blond hair was lost in a tangle of bodies. The straw hat had rolled away, blown across the runway by the breeze.

"What?" Sir Graham rasped. "How?" He couldn't find the words.

"Invisible Sword," Blunt said.

At that exact moment, a quarter of a mile away in Terminal Two, passengers were just arriving on a flight from Rome. At passport control the officer noticed a mother and a father with their son. The boy was fourteen years old. He was overweight, with black curly hair, thick glasses and terrible skin. There was a slight moustache on his upper lip. He was Italian; his passport gave his name as Federico Casali.

The passport officer might have looked more closely at the boy. There was some sort of alert out for a fourteen-year-old called Alex Rider. But he knew what was happening out on the main runway. Everyone knew. The whole airport was in a state of panic and right now he was distracted. He didn't even bother comparing the face in front of him with the picture that had been circulated. What was happening outside was much more important.

Scorpio had timed it perfectly.

The boy took his passport and slouched away, through customs and out of the airport.

Alex Rider had come home.

Chapter 13: PIZZA DELIVERY

Spies have to be careful where they live.

An ordinary person will choose a house or a flat because it has nice views, because they like the shape of the rooms, because it feels like home. For spies, the first consideration is security. There's a comfortable sitting room—but will the window offer a target for a possible sniper's bullet? A garden is fine—so long as the fence is high enough and there aren't too many shrubs providing cover for an intruder. The neighbours, of course, will be checked. So will the postman, the milkman, the window cleaner and anyone else who comes to the front door. The front door itself may have as many as five separate locks and there will be alarm systems, night cameras and panic buttons. Someone once said that an Englishman's home is his castle. For a spy, it can be his prison too.

Mrs Jones lived in the penthouse flat on the ninth floor of a building in Clerkenwell, not far from the old meat market at Smithfields. There were forty flats altogether and the security check run by MI6 had shown that the majority of the residents were bankers or lawyers, working in the City. Melbourne House was not cheap. Mrs Jones had two thousand square metres and two private balconies on the top floor—a great deal of space, particularly as she lived alone. On the open market it would have cost her in excess of a million pounds when she bought it seven years ago. But as it happened, MI6 had a file on the developer. The developer had seen it and had been glad to do a deal.

The flat was secure. And from the moment Alan Blunt had decided his second in command might need protection, it had become more so.

The front doors opened onto a long, rather stark reception area with a desk, two fig trees and a single lift at the far end. There were closed-circuit television cameras above the desk and outside in the street, recording everyone who entered. Melbourne House had porters working twenty-four hours, seven days a week, but Blunt had replaced them with agents from his own office. They would remain there for as long as necessary. He had also installed a metal detector next to the reception desk, identical to the sort you would find in an airport. All visitors had to pass through it.

The other residents hadn't been particularly happy about this, but they had been assured it was only temporary.

Reluctantly they had agreed. They all knew that the woman who lived alone on the top floor worked for some government department. They also knew that it was better not to ask too many questions. The metal detector arrived; it was installed. Life went on.

It was impossible to get into Melbourne House without passing the two agents on the front desk. There was a goods entrance at the back but it was locked and alarmed. The building couldn't be climbed. The walls had no footholds of any sort; anyway, there were four more agents on constant patrol. Finally there was an agent on duty outside Mrs Jones's front door, and he had a clear view of the corridor in both directions. There was nowhere to hide. The agent—in radio contact with those downstairs—was armed with a high-tech, fingerprint-sensitive automatic weapon. Only he could fire it, so if—impossibly—he was overpowered, his gun would be useless.

Mrs Jones had protested about all these arrangements. It was one of the very few times she had ever argued with her superior.

"For heaven's sake, Alan! We're talking about Alex Rider."

"No, Mrs Jones. We're talking about Scorpio."

There had been no more discussion after that.

At half past eleven that night, just hours after the deaths at Heathrow Airport, two agents were sitting behind the front desk. Both were in their twenties, dressed in the uniform of security guards. One was plump, with short, fair hair and a childish face that looked as if it would never need a shave. His name was Lloyd. He had been thrilled to get into MI6 straight from university, but he was fast becoming disappointed. This sort of work, for example. It wasn't what he had expected. The other man was dark and looked foreign; he could have been mistaken for a Brazilian footballer. He was smoking a cigarette, even though it wasn't allowed in the building, and this annoyed Lloyd. His name was Ramirez. The two men had started their night shift a few hours ago.

They would be there until seven the next morning, when Mrs Jones left.

They were bored. As far as they were concerned, there was no chance of anyone getting anywhere near their boss on the ninth floor. And as if to add insult to injury, they had been told to look out for a fourteen-year-old boy. They had been given a photograph of Alex Rider, and they both agreed that it was crazy. Why would a schoolboy be gunning for the deputy head of Special Operations?

"Maybe she's his aunt," Lloyd mused. "Maybe she's forgotten his birthday and he's out for revenge."

Ramirez blew a smoke ring. "You really believe that?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I don't care. It's just a waste of time." They had been talking about the events at Heathrow. Even though they were part of MI6, they were too junior to be told what had really happened to the football squad. According to the radio, the players had picked up a rare disease in Nigeria. Quite how they had all managed to die at the same moment hadn't so far been explained.

"It was probably malaria," Lloyd guessed. "They've got these new mosquitoes out there."

"Mosquitoes?"

"Super-mosquitoes. Genetically modified."

"Yeah. Sure!"

Just then the front doors swung open and a young black man swaggered into the reception area, dressed in motorbike leathers, a helmet in one hand and a canvas bag slung over his shoulder. There was a logo on his chest, repeated on the bag: Perelli's Pizzas Grab yourself a pizza the action The agents ran their eyes over him.

About seventeen or eighteen years old. Short, frizzy hair and a wispy beard. A gold tooth. And lots of attitude.

He was smiling crookedly as if he wasn't just delivering fast food to a fancy flat. As if he lived here.

Lloyd stopped him. "Who are you delivering to?"

The delivery man looked taken aback. He dug into his top pocket and pulled out a grubby sheet of paper.

"Foster," he said. "A pizza wanted on the sixth floor."

Ramirez was also taking an interest. It was going to be a long night. Nobody had come in or out yet. "We're going to have to take a look in that bag," he said.

The delivery man rolled his eyes. "Are you kidding me, man? It's just a frigging pizza, that's all. What is this place? Fort Knox or something?"

"We need to take a look inside," Lloyd informed him.

"Yeah. OK. Jesus!"

The delivery man opened the bag and took out a litre bottle of Coca-Cola which he set upright on the desk.

"I thought you said you only had a pizza," Lloyd complained.

"One pizza. One bottle of Coke. You want to call my office?"

The two agents exchanged glances. "What else have you got in there?" Lloyd asked.

"You want to see everything?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, we do."

"OK! OK!"

The delivery man put down his helmet next to the bottle. He produced a handful of drinking straws, still in their paper wrappers. Next out was a rectangular card, about fifteen centimetres long.

Lloyd took it. "What's this?"

"What does it look like?" The delivery man sighed. "I'm meant to leave it behind. It's like ... a promotion.

Can't you read?"

"You want to come into this place, you mind your manners."

"It's a promotion. We leave them all over town." Lloyd examined the card. There were pictures of pizzas on both sides and a series of special offers.

Family-sized pizza, Coke and garlic bread for just nine pounds fifty. Order before seven and get a pound off.

"You want to order pizza?" the delivery man asked.

He was rubbing the two agents up the wrong way. "No," Lloyd said. "But we want to see the pizza you're delivering."

"You can't do that, man! That's not hygienic."

"We don't see it; you don't deliver it."

"OK. Whatever you say. You know, I've been delivering all over London and I've never had this before."

With a scowl he took out a cardboard box, warm to the touch, and laid it on the reception desk. Lloyd lifted the lid and there was the pizza—a four seasons, with ham, cheese, tomato and black olives. The smell of melted mozzarella wafted upwards.

"You want to taste it too?" the delivery man asked sarcastically.

"No. What else have you got in there?"

"There is nothing else. It's empty." The delivery man yanked open the canvas bag to show them. "You know, if you're so worried about security, why don't you deliver it yourself?"

Lloyd closed the box. He knew he should do just that. But he was a secret agent, not a pizza boy! And anyway, the pizza was only going as far as the sixth floor. He could see the lift from where he was standing. There was a steel panel next to the door, marked with the letter G and then the numbers from one to nine. Each number lit up as the lift travelled and if the pizza delivery man tried to go any further, he would see. As for the stairs between the floors, they had been equipped with pressure pads and security cameras. Even the air-conditioning ducts running through the building had been alarmed.

It was safe.

"OK," he decided. "You can take it up. You go straight to floor number six. You do not go anywhere else. Do you understand that?"

"Why should I want to go anywhere else? I've got pizza for someone called Foster and she's on the sixth floor."

The delivery man reloaded the bag and walked away.

"You go through the metal detector," Ramirez ordered.

"You got a metal detector? I thought this was a block of flats, not Heathrow Airport."

The delivery man handed his helmet to Ramirez and, with the canvas bag over his shoulder, walked through the metal frame. The machine was silent.

"There you are!" he said. "I'm clean. Now can I deliver the pizza?"

"Wait a minute!" The fair-haired agent sounded threatening. "You forgot the Coke—and your promotions card."

He picked the two items up from the reception desk and handed them over.

"Yeah. Thanks." The delivery man began to walk towards the lift.

He had known he would be stopped.

Behind the wig and the black latex mask, Alex Rider heaved a sigh of relief. The disguise had worked. Nile had told him it would and he'd had no reason to doubt it. He had been careful to make his voice sound older, with an authentic accent. The motorbike leathers had thickened out his build and he was wearing special shoes that had added three centimetres to his height. He hadn't been worried about his bag being searched. The moment he'd set eyes on them Alex had known that Lloyd and Ramirez were new to the game, with little field experience.

If they had taken him up on his offer and demanded to call the pizza company, Alex would have given them a business card with the phone number. But it would have been Scorpia who answered. If they had been smart, the two agents might have telephoned up to the sixth floor. But Sarah Foster—the owner of the flat—was away.

Her line had been switched from outside. The call would be redirected ... again to Scorpia.

Everything had gone exactly as planned.

Alex had been taken from Malagosto to Rome, where he had boarded a flight with two Scorpia people he had never seen before. They had been with him at Heathrow, accompanying him through passport control to ensure there was no problem. How could there have been? Alex was in disguise—he had a false passport. And there seemed to be some sort of security alert at the airport—everyone was running around in circles. Doubtless it had been engineered by Scorpia.

From Heathrow he had been taken to a house in the middle of London, catching only a glimpse of the front door and the quiet, leafy road before he was whisked inside. Nile had been waiting for him there, sitting on an antique chair with his legs crossed.

"Federico!" He greeted Alex by the name on his fake passport.

Alex said little. Nile swiftly briefed him. He was given another disguise—the pizza delivery man costume—as well as everything he needed to break into Mrs Jones's flat and kill her. How he got out again would be his problem.

"It'll be easy," Nile said. "You'll just walk out the way you came in. And if there is any trouble, I'm sure you'll cope, Alex. I have every faith in you."

Scorpia had already reconnoitred the flat. Nile showed him the plans. They knew where the cameras were, how many pressure pads had been installed, how many agents had been commandeered. And everything had been worked out, right down to the Coke bottle which Alex had deliberately left on the reception desk and which had been handed back to him without being passed through the metal detector frame. It was simple psychology. A plastic bottle filled with liquid. How could it possibly contain anything metallic?

Alex reached the lift and stopped. This was the vital moment.

He had his back to the two agents. He was standing between them and the lift, blocking their line of vision. He had already slipped the special offers card out of the canvas bag as he walked, and he was holding it in both hands. In fact, one side of the card peeled off to reveal a thin silver plate engraved with the letter G and the numbers one to nine. It was identical to the plate beside the lift. The other side was magnetic. Casually, Alex leant forward and placed the fake panel over the real one. It was held in place immediately. Sticking it there had also activated it. Now it was just a matter of timing.

The lift doors opened and he entered. As he turned round, he saw the two agents watching him. He reached out and pressed the button for the ninth floor. The lift doors slid shut, cutting off his view. A second later, the lift jerked and moved up.

The two agents saw the numbers changing beside the lift door. Ground ... one ... two... What they didn't realize was that they weren't following the real progress of the lift. A tiny chip and a watch battery inside the silver plate were illuminating the fake numbers. The real numbers were blocked out behind.

Alex arrived at the ninth floor.

The silver panel showed he had stopped at floor six.

It had taken him thirty seconds to travel up from the ground floor. In that time, Alex had discarded the motorbike leathers to reveal, underneath, clothes that were loose, light-wearing and black: the uniform of the ninja assassin. He tugged off his wig and grabbed hold of the latex covering his face. It came off almost in one piece. Finally, he removed the gold tooth. The doors slid open. Once again he was himself.

He had already been shown a floor plan of the entire building. Mrs Jones's flat was to the right—and there were two unforgivable lapses of security. Although there were closed-circuit television cameras in the fire escapes, there were none in the corridor. And the agent standing in front of the door could see all the way from one end to the other, but he couldn't see into the lift. Two blind spots. Alex was about to take advantage of them both.

The agent on the ninth floor had heard the lift arrive. Like Lloyd and Ramirez downstairs, he was new to the job. He wondered why they had sent the lift up. Perhaps he should radio down and find out. Before he could make any decision, a boy with fair hair and death in his eyes stepped out. Alex Rider was holding one of the drinking straws that the two agents had seen but not examined. He had unwrapped it, and it was already between his

lips. He blew.

The fukidake—or blowgun—was another lethal weapon used by the ninjas. A needle-sharp dart fired into a major artery could kill instantly. But there were also darts that had been hollowed out and filled with poison. A ninja could hit a man over a distance of twenty metres or more without making any sound at all. Alex was much closer than that. Fortunately for the agent, the dart that he fired out of the straw contained only a sleeping draught. It hit the side of his cheek. The agent opened his mouth to cry out, stared stupidly at Alex, then collapsed.

Alex knew he had to move quickly. The two agents downstairs would allow him a couple of minutes but then they would expect him to return. He grabbed the Coke bottle and opened it—not turning the lid but the bottle itself. The bottle came apart in half. Dark brown liquid poured out, soaking into the carpet. Inside the bottle was a package, wrapped in brown plastic, the same colour as the Coke. With the label covering most of it, the package had been completely invisible. Alex tore it open. There was a gun inside.

It was a Kahr P9, double-action semi-automatic, manufactured in America. It was six inches long and, with its stainless steel and polymer construction, it weighed just eighteen ounces, making it one of the smallest, lightest pistols in the world. The in-line magazine could have held several bullets; to keep the weight down, Scorpia had provided just one. It was all Alex would need.

Carrying the canvas bag with the pizza, he went past the sleeping agent and over to Mrs Jones's door. It had three locks, as he had been told. He lifted the pizza box lid and removed three of the black olives from the top, squeezing each one against a lock. The canvas bag had a false bottom. He opened it and trailed out three wires which he connected to the olives. A plastic box and a button were built into the bottom of the bag. Crouching down, Alex pressed it. The olives—which weren't olives at all—exploded silently, each one a brilliant flare, burning into the locks. The sharp smell of molten metal rose in the air. The door swung open.

Holding the gun tightly, Alex walked into a large room with grey curtains draped along the far wall, a dining table with four chairs, and a suite of leather sofas. It was lit by a soft yellow glow radiating from a single lamp.

The room was modern and sparsely furnished; there was little in it that told him any more about Mrs Jones than he already knew. Even the pictures on the walls were abstracts, blobs of colour that gave nothing away. But there were clues. He saw a photograph on a shelf, a younger Mrs Jones—actually smiling—with two children, a boy and a girl aged about six and four. A nephew and a niece? They looked a lot like her.

Mrs Jones read books; she had an expensive television and a DVD player; and there was a chessboard. She was halfway through a game. But who with? Alex wondered. Nile had told him she lived alone. He heard a soft purring and noticed a Siamese cat stretched out on one of the sofas. That was a surprise. He hadn't expected the deputy head of MI6 Special Operations to need companionship of any sort.

The purring grew louder. It was as if the cat were trying to warn its owner that he was there; and, sure enough, a door opened on the other side of the room.

"What is it, Q?"

Mrs Jones walked in. Approaching the cat, she suddenly saw Alex and stopped. "Alex!"

"Mrs Jones."

She was wearing a grey silk dressing gown. Alex suddenly saw a snapshot of her life and the emptiness at the heart of it. She came home from work, had a shower, ate dinner on her own. Then there was the chess game ...

maybe she was playing over the Internet. News at Ten on the television. And the cat.

She paused in the middle of the room. She didn't seem alarmed. There was nothing she could do—certainly no panic button or alarm she could reach. Her hair was still wet from the shower; Alex noticed her bare feet. He raised his hand and she saw the gun.

"Did Scorpia send you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"To kill me."

"Yes."

She nodded as if she understood why this should be so. "They told you about your father," she said.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Sorry you killed him?"

"Sorry I didn't tell you myself."

She didn't try to move; she simply stood there, facing him. Alex knew he didn't have much time. Any moment now the lift might return to the ground floor. As soon as the agents saw he wasn't in it, they would raise the alarm. They might already be on their way up.

"What happened to Winters?" she asked. Alex didn't know whom she meant. "He was outside the door," she explained.

Winters was the third agent.

"I knocked him out."

"So you got past the two downstairs. You came up here. And you broke in." Mrs Jones shrugged. "Scorpia have trained you well."

"It wasn't Scorpia who trained me, Mrs Jones: it was you."

"But now you've joined Scorpia."

Alex nodded.

"I can't quite picture you as an assassin, Alex. I realize you don't like me—or Alan Blunt. I can understand that.

But I know you. I don't think you have any idea what you've got yourself into. I bet Scorpia were all smiles; I'm sure they were delighted to see you. But they've been lying to you—"

"Stop it!" Alex's finger tightened on the trigger. He knew that she was trying to make it difficult for him. He had been warned that this was what she would do. By talking to him, by using his first name, she was reminding him that she wasn't just a paper cut-out, a target. She was sowing doubts in his mind. And, of course, she was playing for time.

Nile had told him to do it quickly, the instant they met. Alex realized that this was already going wrong; she had already gained the upper hand—even though he was the one with the gun. He reminded himself of what Mrs Rothman had shown him in Positano. Albert Bridge. The death of his father. He was facing the woman who had given the order to shoot.

"Why did you do it?" he demanded. His voice had become a whisper. He was trying to channel the hatred through him, to give him the strength to do what he had been sent here for.

"Why did I do what, Alex?"

"You killed my father."

Mrs Jones looked at him for a long moment and it was impossible to tell what was going on in those black eyes.

But he could see that she was making some sort of calculation. Of course, her entire life was a series of calculations—and once she'd worked out the figures, someone would usually die. The only difference here was that the death would be her own.

She seemed to come to a decision.

"Do you want me to apologize to you, Alex?" she asked, suddenly hard. "We're talking about John Rider, a man you never knew. You never spoke to him; you have no memory of him. You know nothing about him."

"He was still my dad!"

"He was a killer. He worked for Scorpia. Do you know how many people he murdered?"

Five or six. That was what Mrs Rothman had told him.

"There was a businessman working in Peru; he was married with a son your age. There was a priest in Rio de Janeiro; he was trying to help the street children, but unfortunately he'd made too many enemies so had to be taken out. There was a British policeman. An American agent. Then there was a woman; she was about to blow the whistle on a big corporation in Sydney. She was only twenty-six, Alex, and he shot her as she was getting out of her car—"

"That's enough!" Now Alex was holding the gun with both hands. "I don't want to hear any of this."

"Yes, you do, Alex. You asked me. You wanted to know why he had to be stopped. And that's what you're going to do, isn't it? Follow in your father's footsteps. I'm sure they'll send you all over the world, making you kill people you know nothing about. And I'm sure you'll be very good at it. Your father was one of the best."

"You cheated him. He was your prisoner and you said you were letting him go. You were going to swap him for someone else. But you shot him in the back. I saw..."

"I always wondered if they filmed it," Mrs Jones murmured. She gestured and Alex stiffened, wondering if she was trying to misdirect him. But they were still alone. The cat had gone to sleep. Nobody was approaching the room. "I'll give you some advice," she said. "You'll need it if you're going to work with Scorpia. Once you join the other side, there are no rules. They don't believe in fair play. Nor do we.

"They had kidnapped an eighteen-year-old." Alex remembered the figure on the bridge. "He was the son of a British civil servant. They were going to kill him; but they were going to torture him first. We had to get him back—so, yes, I arranged the exchange. But there was no way I was ever going to release your father. He was too dangerous. Too many more people would have died. And so I arranged a double-cross. Two men on a bridge. A sniper. It worked perfectly and I'm glad. You can shoot me if it really makes you feel any better, Alex.

But I'm telling you: you didn't know your father. And if I had to do it all again, I'd do it exactly the same."

"If you're saying my father was so evil, what do you think that makes me?" Alex was trying to will himself to shoot. He had thought anger would give him strength, but he was more tired than angry. So now he searched for another way to persuade himself to pull the trigger. He was his father's son. It was in his blood.

Mrs Jones took a step towards him.

"Stay where you are!" The gun was less than a metre from her, aiming straight at her head.

"I don't think you're a killer, Alex. You never knew your father. Why do you have to be like him? Do you think every child is 'made' the moment they're born? I think you have a choice..."

"I never chose to work for you."

"Didn't you? After Stormbreaker you could have walked away. We never needed to meet again. But if you remember, you chose to get tangled up with drug dealers and we had to bail you out. And then there was Wimbledon. We didn't make you go undercover. You agreed to go—and if you hadn't locked a Chinese gangster in a deep freeze, we wouldn't have had to send you to America."

"You're twisting everything!"

And finally Damian Cray. You went after him on your own and we're very grateful to you, Alex. But you ask me—what do I think you are? I think you're too smart to pull that trigger. You're not going to shoot me. Now or ever."

"You're wrong," Alex said. She was lying to him, he knew that. She had always lied to him. He could do this.

He had to do it. He held the gun steady. He let the hatred take him. And fired.

The air in front of him seemed to explode into fragments.

Mrs Jones had tricked him. She had been tricking him all along, and he hadn't seen it. The room was divided into two parts. A huge pane of transparent, bulletproof glass ran from one corner to the other, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. She had been on one side; he had been on the other. In the half-light it had been invisible, but now the glass frosted, a thousand cracks spiralling outwards from the dent made by the bullet.

Mrs Jones had almost disappeared from sight, her face broken up as if she had become a smashed picture of herself. At the same time, an alarm rang, the door flew open and Alex was grabbed and thrown sideways onto the sofa. The gun went flying. Somebody shouted something in his ear but he couldn't understand the words.

The cat snarled and leapt past him. His arms were wrenched behind him. A knee pressed into his back. A bag was pulled over his head and he felt cold steel against his wrists. There was a click. He could no longer move his hands.

Now he could make out several voices in the room.

"Are you all right, Mrs Jones?"

"We're sorry, ma'am..."

"We've got the car waiting outside..."

"Don't hurt him!"

Alex was jerked off the sofa with his hands cuffed behind him. He felt wretched and sick. He had failed Scorpia. He had failed his father. He had failed himself.

He didn't cry out. He didn't resist. Limp and unmoving, he allowed himself to be dragged out of the room, back down the corridor and into the night.

Chapter 14: COBRA

The room was a bare white box, designed to intimidate. Alex had measured out the space: ten paces one way, four across. There was a narrow bunk with no sheets or blankets, and, behind a partition, a toilet. But that was all. The door had no handle and fitted so flush to the wall that it was almost invisible. There was no window.

Light came from behind a square panel in the ceiling and was controlled from outside.

Alex had no idea how long he had been here. His watch had been removed.

After he had been taken from Mrs Jones's flat, he had been bundled into a car. The black cloth bag was still over his head. He had no idea where he was going. They drove at speed for what seemed like half an hour, then slowed down. Alex felt his stomach sink and knew they were heading down some sort of ramp. Had they taken him to the basement of the Liverpool Street HQ? He had been here once before but this time he was to be given no chance to take his bearings. The car stopped. The door opened and he was grabbed and dragged out. Nobody spoke to him. He was marched along pinned between two men—and down a flight of stairs. Then his hands were unlocked, and the bag was pulled off. He just had time to glimpse Lloyd and Ramirez—the two agents from the reception desk—as they walked out. Then the door closed and he was on his own.

He lay on his back, remembering the final moments in the flat. He was amazed that he hadn't seen the glass barrier until it was too late. Had Mrs Jones's voice been amplified in some way? It didn't matter. He had tried to kill her. He had finally found the strength to pull the trigger, proving that Scorpia had been right about him all along.

He was a killer. Do you know how many people he murdered?

Alex remembered what Mrs Jones had said about his father. She was the one who had given the order for John Rider's death; she had arranged it. She deserved to die.

Or so he tried to persuade himself. But the worst thing was, he half understood what she meant. Suppose his father hadn't been killed on Albert Bridge. Suppose Alex had grown up with him and somehow found out what his father did. How would he have felt about it? Would he have been able to forgive him?

Sitting on his own in this cruel white room, Alex thought back to the moment when he had fired the gun. He felt again the shudder in his hand. Saw the invisible glass screen crack but not break. Good old Smithers! It was almost certainly the MI6 gadget master who had fixed it up. And, despite everything, Alex was glad. He was glad he hadn't killed Mrs Jones.

He wondered what would happen to him now. Would MI6 prosecute? More likely, they would interrogate him.

They would want to know about Malagosto, about Mrs Rothman and Nile. But maybe after that, at last, they would leave him alone. After what had happened, they would never trust him again.

He fell asleep—not just exhausted but drained. It was a black and empty sleep, without dreams, without any feeling of comfort or warmth.

The sound of the door opening woke him up. He opened his eyes and blinked. It was disconcerting having no idea of the time. He could have slept for a few hours or all night. He wasn't feeling rested; there was a crick in his neck. But without a window it was impossible to say. "You need the toilet?"

"No."

"Then come with me."

The man at the door wasn't Lloyd or Ramirez or anyone Alex had ever met at MI6. He had a blank, uninteresting face and Alex knew that if they met the next day, he would already have forgotten him. He got off the bunk and walked towards the door, suddenly nervous. Nobody knew he was here. Not Tom, not Jack Starbright ... nobody. MI6 could make him disappear. Permanently. Nobody would ever find out what had happened to him. Maybe that was what they had in mind.

But there was nothing he could do. He followed the agent along a curving corridor with a steel mesh floor and fat pipes following the line of the ceiling. He could have been in the engine room of a ship.

"I'm hungry," he complained. He was. But he also wanted to show this agent that he wasn't afraid. "I'm taking you to breakfast." Breakfast! So he had slept through the night. "Don't worry," Alex said. "You can drop me off at a McDonald's."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. In here..." They had arrived at a second door and Alex went through into a strange, curving room—obviously they were still underground. There were thick glass panels built into the ceiling and he could see the forms of people—commuters—walking overhead. The room was beneath a pavement. Feet of different sizes and shapes touched, briefly, against the glass. Above them the commuters were like ghosts, twisting, rippling, moving soundlessly by as they made their way to work. There was a table on which were arranged fruit salad, cereal, milk, croissants and coffee. Alex welcomed the sight of breakfast but lost some of his appetite when he saw whom he was supposed to share it with. Alan Blunt was waiting for him, sitting in a chair on the other side of the table, dressed in yet another of his neat, grey suits. He really did look like the bank manager that he had once pretended to be, a man in his fifties, more comfortable with figures and statistics than with human beings.

"Good morning, Alex," he said.

Alex didn't reply.

"You can leave us, Burns. Thank you."

The agent nodded and backed out. The door swung shut. Alex approached the table and sat down.

"Are you hungry, Alex? Please. Help yourself."

"No thanks." Alex was hungry. But he wouldn't feel comfortable eating in front of this man.

"Don't be stupid. You need your breakfast. You have a very busy day ahead of you." Blunt waited for Alex to respond. Alex said nothing. "Do you realize how much trouble you're in?" Blunt demanded.

"Perhaps I will have some Weetabix after all," Alex said.

He helped himself. Blunt watched him coldly. "We have very little time," Blunt said as Alex ate. "I have some questions for you. You will answer them fully and honestly."

"And if I don't?"

"What do you think? Do you think I'll give you a truth serum or something? You'll answer my questions because it's in your interest to do so. Right now, I don't think you have any idea what's at stake. But believe me when I tell you that this meeting is vital. We have to know what you know. More lives than you can imagine may depend on it."

Alex lowered his spoon and nodded. "Go on."

"You were recruited by Julia Rothman?"

"You know who she is?"

"Of course we do."

"Yes. I was."

"You were taken to Malagosto?"

"Yes."

"And you were sent to kill Mrs Jones."

Alex felt a need to defend himself. "She killed my dad."

"That's not the issue."

"Not for you."

"Just answer the question."

"Yes. I was sent to kill Mrs Jones."

"Good." Blunt nodded. "I need to know who brought you to London. What you were told. And what you were to do when you completed your mission."

Alex hesitated. If he told Blunt all this, he knew he would be betraying Scorpia. But suddenly he didn't care. He had been drawn into a world where everyone betrayed everyone. He just wanted to get out.

"They had a layout of her flat," he said. "They knew everything, except for the glass screen. All I had to do was wait for her to appear. Two of their agents took me through Heathrow. We came in as an Italian family; they never told me their real names. I had a fake passport."

"Where did they take you?"

"I don't know. A house somewhere. I didn't get a chance to see the address." Alex paused. "Where is Mrs Jones?"

"She didn't want to see you." Alex nodded. "I can understand that."

"After you killed her, what were you supposed to do?"

"They gave me a phone number. I was meant to ring it the moment I'd done what they wanted. But they'll know you've got me now. I expect they were watching the flat."

There was a long silence. Blunt was examining Alex minutely, like a scientist with an interesting lab specimen.

Alex squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

"Do you want to work for Scorpia?" Blunt demanded.

"I don't know." Alex shrugged. "I'm not sure it's any different to working for you."

"You don't believe that. You can't believe that."

"I don't want to work for either of you!" Alex cut in. "I just want to go back to school. I don't want to see any of you ever again."

"I wish that were possible, Alex." For once, Blunt actually sounded sincere. "Let me tell you something that may surprise you. It's been six ... seven months since we first met. In that time, you've proved yourself to be remarkably useful. You've been more successful than I could possibly have calculated. And yet, in truth, I wish we had never met."

"Why?"

"Because there has to be something wrong—seriously wrong—when the security of the entire country rests on the shoulders of a fourteen-year-old boy. Believe me, I would be very glad to let you walk out of here. You don't belong in my world any more than I belong in yours. But I can't let you go back to Brookland, because in approximately thirty hours every child in that school could be dead. Thousands of children in London could have joined them. This is what your friends in Scorpia have promised, and I have no doubt at all that they mean what they say."

"Thousands?" Alex had gone pale. He hadn't expected anything like this. What had he walked into?

"Maybe more. Maybe many thousands."

"How?"

"We don't know. You may. All I can tell you now is that Scorpia have made a series of demands. We cannot give them what they want. And they're going to make us pay a heavy price."

"What do you want from me?" Alex asked. All the strength seemed to have drained out of him.

"Scorpia have made one mistake. They've sent you to us. I want to know everything you've seen—everything Julia Rothman told you. We still have no idea what we're up against, Alex. You may at least be able to give us a clue."

Thousands of children in London.

Assassination, Alex. It's part of what we do.

That was what she had said.

This was what she meant.

"I don't know anything," Alex said, his head bowed.

"You may know more than you think. You're all that stands between Scorpia and an unimaginable bloodbath. I know what you think of me; I know how you feel about MI6. But are you willing to help?"

Alex slowly raised his head. He examined the man sitting opposite him and saw something he would never have believed. Alan Blunt was afraid. "Yes," he said. "I'll help you."

"Good. Then finish your breakfast, have a shower and get changed. The prime minister has called a meeting of Cobra. I want you to attend."

Cobra.

The acronym stands for Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, which is where, at 10 Downing Street, the meetings take place. Cobra is an emergency council, the government's ultimate response to any major crisis.

The prime minister is, of course, present when Cobra sits. So are most of his senior ministers, his director of communications, his chief of staff and representatives from the police, the army and the intelligence and security services. Finally there are the civil servants, men in dark suits with long and meaningless job titles.

Everything that happens, everything that's said, is recorded, minuted and then filed away for thirty years under the Official Secrets Act. Politics may be called a game, but Cobra is deadly serious. Decisions made here can bring down a government. The wrong decision could destroy the entire country.

Alex Rider had been shown into another room and left to shower and change into fresh clothes. He recognized the Pepe jeans and World Cup rugby shirt: they were his own. Somebody must have been round to his home to fetch them, and seeing them laid out on a chair he felt a pang of guilt. He hadn't spoken to Jack since he had left for Venice. He wondered if anyone from MI6 had told her what was happening. He doubted it. MI6 never told anyone anything unless they had to.

But as he pulled on the jeans, he felt something rustle in one of the back pockets. He dipped his hand in and took out a folded sheet of paper. He opened it and recognized Jack's handwriting.

Alex,

What have you got yourself mixed up in this time? Two secret agents (spies) waiting downstairs.

Suits and sunglasses. Think they're smart, but I bet they don't look in the jackets.

Thinking of you. Take care of yourself. Try and come home in one piece.

Love you, Jack.

That made him smile. It seemed it had been a long time since anything had happened to cheer him up.

As he had thought, the cell and interrogation room were beneath the MI6 headquarters. He was led out to a car park where a navy blue Jaguar XJ6 was waiting, and the two of them were driven up the ramp and out into Liverpool Street itself. Alex settled into the leather seat. He found it strange to be sitting so close to the head of MI6 Special Operations without a table or a desk between them. Blunt was in no mood to talk.

"You'll be brought up to date at the meeting," he muttered briefly. "But while we're driving there, I want you to think of everything that happened to you while you were with Scorpia. Everything you overheard. If I had more time, I'd debrief you myself. But Cobra won't wait."

After that he buried himself in a report which he took from his briefcase, and Alex might as well have been alone. He looked out of the window as the chauffeur drove them west, across London. It was quarter past nine.

People were still hurrying to work. Shops were opening. On one side of the glass, life was going on as normal.

But once again Alex was on the wrong side, sitting in this car with this man, heading into God knows what.

He watched as they arrived at Charing Cross and stopped at the lights at Trafalgar Square. Blunt was still reading. Suddenly there was something Alex wanted to know.

“Is Mrs Jones married?” he asked.

Blunt looked up. “She was.”

“In her flat I saw a photograph of her with two children.”

“They were hers. They’d be about your age now. But she lost them.”

“They died?”

“They were taken.”

Alex digested this. Blunt’s replies were leaving him hardly any the wiser. “Are you married?” he asked.

Blunt turned away. “I don’t discuss my personal life.”

Alex shrugged. Frankly he was surprised Blunt had one.

They drove down Whitehall and then turned right, through the gates that were already open to receive them.

The car stopped and Alex got out, his head spinning. He was standing in front of probably the most famous front door in the world. And the door was open. A policeman stepped forward to usher him in. Blunt had already disappeared ahead. Alex followed.

The first surprise was how large 10 Downing Street was inside. It was two or three times bigger than he had expected, opening out in all directions, with high ceilings and a corridor stretching improbably into the distance. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Works of art, lent by major galleries, lined the walls.

Blunt had been greeted by a tall, grey-haired man in an old-fashioned suit and striped tie. The man had the sort of face that would not have looked out of place in a Victorian portrait. It belonged to another world, and like an old painting it seemed to have faded. Only the eyes, small and dark, showed any life. They flickered over Alex and seemed to know him at once.

“So this is Alex Rider,” the man said. He held out a hand. “My name is Graham Adair.”

He was looking at Alex as if he knew him—but Alex was sure the two of them had never met before.

“Sir Graham is permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office,” Blunt explained.

“I’ve heard a great deal about you, Alex. I have to say, I’m pleased to meet you. I owe you a great deal. More, I think, than you can imagine.”

“Thanks.” Alex was puzzled. He didn’t know what Sir Graham meant, and wondered if the man had been involved in some way in one of his previous assignments.

“I understand you’re joining us at Cobra. I’m very glad—although I should warn you that there may be one or two people there who know less about you and may resent your presence.”

“I’m used to it,” Alex said.

“I’m sure. Well, come this way. I hope you can help us. We’re up against something very different and none of us is quite sure what to do.”

Alex followed the permanent secretary along the corridor, through an archway and into a large, wood-panelled room with at least forty people gathered around a huge conference table. Alex’s first impression was that they were all middle-aged and, with only a few exceptions, male and white. Then he realized how many faces he recognized. The prime minister was sitting at the head of the table. The deputy prime minister—fat and jowly—

was next to him. The foreign secretary was fiddling nervously with his tie. Another man who might have been the defence secretary was opposite him. Most of the men were in suits but there were also uniforms—army and police. Everyone in the room had a thick file in front of them. Two elderly women, dressed in black suits and white shirts, sat in the corners, their fingers poised over what looked like miniature typewriters.

Blunt waved Alex to an empty chair at the table and sat down next to him. Sir Graham took his seat on the other side. Alex noticed a few heads turn in his direction but nobody said anything.

The prime minister stood and Alex felt the same buzz he’d experienced when he first met Damian Cray—the realization that he was seeing, close up, a face known all over the world. The prime minister looked older and shabbier than he did on television. Here there was no make-up, no subtle lighting. He looked defeated.

“Good morning,” he said, and everyone in the room fell silent.

The meeting of Cobra had begun.

Chapter 15: REMOTE CONTROL

They had been talking for three hours.

The prime minister had read out the contents of Scorpia's letter, and copies had been placed in every file around the table. Alex had read his with a feeling of sick disbelief. Eighteen innocent people had already died and nobody in the room had any idea how it had happened. Would Scorpia go ahead with the threat to target children in London? Alex was in no doubt, but nobody had asked his opinion and the first hour had been taken up discussing the question over and over again. At least half the people in the room thought it was a bluff. The other half wanted to put pressure on the Americans—to make them agree to Scorpia's demands.

But there was no chance of that happening. The foreign secretary had already met with the American ambassador. The prime minister had spent several hours on the telephone with the president of the United States. This was the American position: Scorpia were asking the impossible. The Americans considered their demands to be laughable, quite possibly insane. The president had offered the help of the FBI to track Scorpia down. Two hundred American agents were already on their way to London. But there was nothing more he could do. Britain was on its own.

This response caused a great deal of anger at Cobra. The deputy prime minister crashed his fist against the table.

"It's incredible! It's a bloody scandal. We help the Americans; we're their closest allies. And now they turn round and tell us to jump in the lake!"

"That's not quite what they've said." The foreign secretary was more cautious. "And I don't know what else they could do. The president has a point. These demands are impossible."

"They could try to negotiate!"

"But the letter says there will be no negotiation—"

"That's what it says. But they could still try!" Alex listened as the two men argued, neither really listening to what the other had to say. So this was how government worked!

Next up was a medical officer with a report on how the footballers had died. "They were all poisoned," he announced. He was a short man, bald, with a round, pink face. He had put on a crumpled suit for the meeting but somehow Alex could tell he spent most of his life in a white coat. "We found traces of cyanide which seem to have been delivered straight to the heart. The amounts were very small—but they were enough."

"How were they administered?" someone—a police chief—asked.

"We don't yet know. They hadn't been shot, that's for sure. There were no unexplained perforations on their skin and there's only one thing we've come up with that's rather odd. We found tiny traces of gold in their blood."

"Gold?" The director of communications spoke for the first time and Alex noticed him sitting next to the prime minister. He was the smallest—and in many ways seemed to be the least imposing—man in the room. And yet, at his single word, every head turned.

"Yes, Mr Kellner. We don't believe the gold particles contributed to their death. But every single one of the players was the same..."

"Well, it all seems pretty obvious to me," Kellner said, and there was a sneer in his voice. He stood up and looked around the crowded table with cold, superior eyes. Alex disliked him at once. He had seen kids like him at Brookland. Small and spiteful, always winding people up. But running in tears to the teachers the moment they got whacked. "All these people died at exactly the same time," he said. "So it's pretty obvious they were all poisoned at the same time. When could that have been? Well, obviously when they were on the plane! I've already checked. The flight lasted six hours and thirty-five minutes and they were given a meal shortly after they left Lagos. There must have been cyanide in the food and it kicked in just after they arrived at Heathrow."

"Are you saying there is no secret weapon?" the deputy prime minister asked. He blinked heavily. "What do Scorpia mean by Invisible Sword then?"

"It's a trick. They're trying to make us think they can kill people by some sort of remote control..."

Remote control. That meant something to Alex. He remembered something he had seen when he'd been inside the Widow's Palace. What was it?

"...but there is no Invisible Sword. They're just trying to frighten us."

"I'm not sure I agree with you, Mr Kellner." The medical officer seemed nervous of the director of communications. "They could all have taken the poison at the same time, I suppose. But each one of those men had his own metabolism. The poison would have reacted more quickly in some than in others."

"They were all athletes. Their metabolisms would have been more or less the same."

"No, Mr Kellner. I don't agree. There were also two coaches and a manager..."

"To hell with them. There is no Invisible Sword. These people are playing games with us. They make demands they know the Americans can't possibly meet, and they threaten us with something that simply isn't going to happen."

"That isn't normally Scorpia's way."

Alex was surprised to see that it was Blunt who had spoken. The head of MI6 Special Operations was sitting on his left. His voice was quiet and very even.

"We've had dealings with them before and they've never yet made a hollow threat."

"You were at Heathrow, Mr Blunt. What do you think happened?"

"I don't know."

"Well, that's very helpful, isn't it? Secret intelligence comes to the table and doesn't have any intelligence to offer. And since you're here"—Mark Kellner seemed to have noticed Alex for the first time—"I'd be fascinated to know why you've brought along a schoolboy. Is he your son?"

"This is Alex Rider." This time it was Sir Graham Adair who spoke. His dark eyes settled on the director of communications. "As you know, Alex has helped us on several occasions. He also happens to be the last person to have had contact with Scorpia."

"Really? And how was that?"

"I sent him to Venice, undercover," Blunt said, and Alex was surprised at how fluently he lied.

"Scorpia have a training school on the island of Malagosto and we needed to know certain details. Alex trained there for a while."

One of the politicians coughed. "Is that really necessary, Mr Blunt?" he asked. "I mean, if it was known that the government was using school-age children for this sort of work, it might not look very good for us."

"I hardly think that's relevant right now," Blunt retorted.

The police chief looked puzzled. He was an elderly man in a blue uniform with brightly polished silver buttons.

"If you know about Scorpia, if you even know where to find them, why can't you take them out?" he asked.

"Why can't we just send in the SAS and kill the whole lot of them?"

"The Italian government might not be too amused to have their territory invaded," Blunt replied. "And anyway, it's not as simple as that. Scorpia's a worldwide organization. We know some of the leaders, but not all of them.

If we eliminate one branch, another one will simply take over the operation. And then they'll come for revenge.

Scorpia never forgive or forget. You have to remember: they may be the ones who are threatening us, but they'll be working for a client and it is the client who is our real enemy."

"And what did Alex Rider find out when he was on Malagosto?" Kellner sneered. He wasn't going to allow himself to be knocked off his pedestal. Not by Alan Blunt. And certainly not by a fourteen-year-old boy.

Alex felt all eyes on him. He shifted uncomfortably. "Mrs Rothman took me out for dinner and she mentioned Invisible Sword," he said. "But she wouldn't tell me what it was."

"Who exactly is Julia Rothman?" Kellner demanded.

"She sits on the executive board of Scorpia," Blunt said. "She is one of nine senior members. Alex met her when he was in Italy."

"Well, that's very helpful," Kellner said. "But if that's all Alex has to offer, we really don't need him here any more."

"There was something about a cold chain," Alex added, remembering the conversation he had overheard at the Widow's Palace. "I don't know what that means, but it may have something to do with it."

In one corner of the room a young, smartly dressed woman with long, black hair sat up in her chair and looked at Alex with sudden interest.

But Kellner had already moved on. "We're being asked to believe that Scorpia can somehow poison thousands of children and arrange for them all to keel over at exactly four o'clock tomorrow afternoon..."

"They'll all be coming out of school," one of the army men said. "It can't be done! The football squad was a stunt. They want to panic us into going public with this, and if we do that the entire credibility of the government will be undermined. Maybe that's what they want."

"Then what are you suggesting we do?" Sir Graham Adair asked. The permanent secretary was trying hard to keep the contempt out of his voice. He remembered what he had seen at Heathrow Airport; he didn't want to see it again all over London.

"Ignore them. Tell them to get lost."

"We can't!" Like almost everyone else, the foreign secretary was clearly afraid of Kellner. But he was determined to have his say. "We can't take that risk!"

"There is no risk. Think about it for a minute. The footballers were poisoned with cyanide. They were all on the same plane at the same time. It wasn't difficult. But if you wanted to poison thousands of kids, how could you possibly do it?"

"Injections," Alex said. Everyone looked at him again. He had worked it out in a split second. It had suddenly come to him, as if spoken by someone else. He had been thinking about a trip he had once made to South America, a long time ago. And then he had remembered what he had seen at Consanto. The little test tubes. All that machinery ... everything utterly sterile. What was it for? Now he understood the link with Dr Liebermann.

And there was something else. When he was in the restaurant with Julia Rothman, she had made a joke about the scientist.

You could say his death was a shot in the arm for us all. A shot in the arm. An injection. "Every schoolchild in London gets injected at some point," Alex said. He was aware that he was now the centre of attention. The prime minister, half the Cabinet, the police and army chiefs, the civil servants—all the most powerful people in the country were here, in this room. He was surrounded by them. And they were all listening to him. "When I was at Consanto, I saw test tubes with liquid in them," he went on. "And there were trays with what looked like eggs."

"Some vaccines are grown in eggs," the medical officer explained. "And Consanto do supply vaccines all over the world." He nodded as he was struck by another thought. "That would also explain what you heard. Of course! The cold chain. It refers to the transportation of vaccines. They have to be kept at a certain temperature all the time. If you break the chain, the vaccine is no use."

"Go on, Alex," Sir Graham Adair urged. "I saw them kill a man called Dr Liebermann," Alex said. "He worked at Consanto and Julia Rothman told me she'd paid him a lot of money to help them with something. Maybe he put something in a whole load of vaccines. Some sort of poison. It would be injected into school kids. There are always injections at the start of term..."

Adair glanced at the medical officer, who nodded. "It's true. There were BCG injections in London last week."

"Last week!" Mark Kellner cut in. His tone of voice hadn't changed; he wasn't accepting any of it. "If they were injected with cyanide a week ago, how come they haven't all dropped dead already? How is this Julia Rothman going to arrange for the poison to work tomorrow afternoon on the dot of four?" A few heads around the table nodded in agreement and he went on. "And I don't suppose the football squad had BCG injections while they were away. Or are you going to tell me I'm wrong?"

"Of course they'd have had injections," the permanent secretary snapped, and Alex saw that he was no longer able to hide his anger. He wasn't even trying. "They were in Nigeria. They wouldn't have been allowed into the country without being inoculated."

"Yes!" The medical officer couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice. "They'd have been inoculated against yellow fever."

"A month ago!" Kellner insisted.

"Then the question isn't how did they administer the poison," Sir Graham said; "the question is—how do they prevent it working until a time of their choosing? That's the secret of Invisible Sword."

"What else can you tell us, Alex?" Blunt asked.

"You were talking about remote control," Alex said. "Well, Mrs Rothman kept a Siberian tiger in her office. It attacked me and I thought I was going to be killed—"

"Are you seriously asking us to believe this?" Kellner enquired.

Alex ignored him. "But then someone came in and pressed a button on what looked like a remote control device. You know, for a TV. The tiger just lay down and went back to sleep."

"Nanoshells."

The young woman who was sitting in a corner and who had been examining Alex earlier had spoken the single word. She obviously hadn't been considered important enough to be given a place at the table, but now she stood up and walked forward. She looked about thirty—after Alex, the youngest person in the room—slim and pale, wearing a suit with a white shirt and a silver chain around her neck.

"What the hell are nanoshells?" the deputy prime minister demanded. "And, for that matter, who are you?"

"This is Dr Rachel Stephenson," the medical officer said. "She's a writer and a researcher ... a specialist in the field of nanotechnology."

"Oh, so now we're moving into science fiction," Kellner complained.

"There's no fiction about it," Dr Stephenson replied, refusing to be intimidated. "Nanotechnology is about manipulating matter at the atomic level and it's already out there in more ways than you would believe."

Universities, food companies, drug agencies and, of course, the military are all spending billions of pounds a year on development programmes and they all agree. In less time than you think, the life of every human being on this planet is going to change for ever. There are some amazing breakthroughs on the way and if you don't believe that, it's time you woke up."

Kellner took this as a personal insult. "I don't see—" he began.

"Tell us about nanoshells," the prime minister said, and it occurred to Alex that it was a while since he had spoken.

"Yes, sir." Dr Stephenson collected her thoughts. "I was already thinking about nanoshells when I heard about the gold particles, but Alex has made it all clear. It's quite complicated and I know we don't have a lot of time, but I'll try to make it as simple as I can."

"Injections must be the answer. What these people have done is to inject first the football players and then goodness knows how many children with gold-coated nanoshells." She paused. "What we're talking about here are tiny bullets—and by tiny I mean about a hundred nanometres across. Just so you know, one nanometre is a billionth of a metre. Or to put it another way, a single hair on your head is about one hundred thousand nanometres wide."

So each one of these bullets is a thousand times smaller than the tip of a human hair."

She leant forward, resting her hands on the table. Nobody moved. Alex couldn't hear anyone so much as breathe.

"What might these bullets consist of?" Dr Stephenson continued. "Well, it's anyone's guess. But if you imagine a Malteser, it would be a bit like that."

The inside would be what we call a polymer bead and might be made of something not very different to a supermarket carrier bag. Don't forget, though, I'm only talking about a few molecules. The polymer would hold everything together and it would be quite easy to mix in the cyanide. When the polymer and the cyanide are released, the person dies."

"And what stops it being released? Well, that's the chocolate on the outside of the Malteser—except what we're talking about here is gold. A solid gold shell, but so tiny you could never see it. All of this would have been done by Dr Liebermann, the man who was killed, using highly advanced colloidal chemistry." She stopped again. "I'm sorry. I'm probably making it sound more complicated than it really is. Basically, what you've got is a

bullet with the poison inside, and after that you fix a protein onto the outside, onto the shell.”

“What does the protein do?” someone asked. “It guides the whole thing, a bit like a heat-seeking missile. It would take too long to explain how it works, but proteins can find their way around the human body. They know exactly where to go. And once the nanoshell was injected, the right protein would direct it straight to the heart.”

“How many of these nanoshells would you need to inject?” Blunt asked.

“That’s impossible to answer,” Dr Stephenson replied. “They’d be sitting right inside the heart. Once the poison was released, it would act almost immediately and you wouldn’t need very much of it. As a matter of fact, we’ve studied the effect of nanoshells on the human body, developing them as a cure for cancer. Of course, this is rather different because Scorpia are only interested in killing, but let me see…” She thought for a moment.

“There’s not very much liquid in a BCG injection. Only about a fiftieth of a teaspoon. At a guess, I’d say you’d only need to add one part cyanide for every one hundred parts of the actual vaccine.” She worked it out and nodded. “That adds up to about one billion nanoshells,” she said. “Just enough to cover the head of a pin.”

“But you said that the poison is safe. It’s protected by the gold.”

“Yes. But I’m afraid that’s where these people have been so very clever. The polymer and poison mix is contained in the gold. It’s sitting inside the heart and it’s not doing anyone any harm. If you leave it alone, it’ll just pass out of the system in a little while and nobody will be any the wiser.

“But Scorpia can break up the gold. And they can do it, like Alex said, by remote control. Have you ever put an egg in a microwave? After a few moments, it explodes. It’s exactly the same here. It could be microwave technology that they’re planning to use.” Stephenson shook her head, her long hair swaying. “No. Microwaves would be too low frequency. I’m sorry. I’m not really an expert on plasmon resonance.” She hesitated. “A terahertz beam might be the answer.”

“I’m sorry, Dr Stephenson,” the foreign secretary said, “but you’re losing me. What are terahertz beams?”

“They’re not much used yet. They sit between the infrared and the microwave bands of the electromagnetic spectrum and they’re being developed for medical imaging and satellite communications.”

“So you’re saying that Scorpia could send out a signal using a satellite and it would break up the gold, releasing the poison…”

“Yes, sir. Except they wouldn’t actually need to use a satellite. In fact, they couldn’t. The beams wouldn’t be strong enough. If you ask me, when those poor men got off the plane at Heathrow, there must have been some sort of satellite dish erected. It was probably put there a long time ago, on one of the buildings or perhaps up a mast, and they’ll have taken it down by now. But all they had to do was throw a switch, the terahertz beams would have broken down the gold and … well, you know the result.”

“Is there any chance that the nanoshells could be broken up accidentally?” Sir Graham Adair asked.

“No. That’s what’s so brilliant about the whole thing. You’d need to know the exact thickness of the gold. That tells you what frequency to use. It’s just like when you shatter a glass by singing the right note. If you ask me, Alex saw that same technology at work with that tiger. The animal must have had some sort of sedative in its bloodstream. They just had to press a button and it fell asleep.”

“So if they’re not using a satellite, what are we looking for?”

“A saucer. It would look much the same as a satellite TV dish, only bigger. They’ve said they’re targeting London kids, so it will have to be somewhere in London. Probably mounted on the side of an office building.

They may call it Invisible Sword, but I’d say it’s more like invisible arrows being fired out of satellite dishes.

They shoot out in a straight line.”

“And how long will it take for the gold to break up once the switch is thrown?”

“A few minutes. Maybe less. Once the gold breaks, the children will die.”

Dr Stephenson backed away from the table and sat down again. She had nothing more to say. Immediately everyone began to speak at once. Alex noticed some of the civil servants talking into mobile phones. The two women in black and white were typing furiously, trying to keep up with the babble of conversation. Meanwhile, the permanent secretary had leant across Alex, talking quickly and quietly to Alan Blunt. Alex saw the spy chief nod. Then the prime minister held up a hand for silence.

It took a few moments for the clamour to die down.

The prime minister glanced at his director of communications, who was looking down, biting his nails.

Everyone was waiting for him to speak.

“All right,” Kellner said. “We know what we’re up against. We know about Invisible Sword. The question is—
what are we going to do?”

Chapter 16: DECISION TIME

You have to evacuate London.”

It was Sir Graham Adair who made the suggestion. This was the result of his swift conversation with Alan Blunt. His voice was soft and measured, but Alex could sense the tension. The permanent secretary was as brittle as ice.

“Scorpia has planned this at exactly the right moment. Four o’clock. Thousands of children will be out of school—on their way home. We have no way of knowing how far these terahertz beams can reach. There may be several dishes, mounted on buildings throughout the capital ... near schools, near tube stations. No child in London will be safe. But as Dr Stephenson has just told us, provided they don’t come into contact with the beams, the poison will pass out of their systems eventually. We can keep them out of the city for as long as it takes.”

“An evacuation on that scale?” The police chief shook his head. “Do you have any idea how much organization that will take? All of this is meant to be happening at four o’clock tomorrow afternoon. We couldn’t possibly arrange everything in time.”

“You could try...”

“Forgive me, Sir Graham. But what reason, exactly, are you going to give? You’ll be closing down every school in the capital. Whole families will have to move. Where are they going to go? What are you going to tell them?”

“We’ll tell them the truth.”

“I don’t think so.” Alex wasn’t surprised that the director of communications had chosen this moment to re-enter the conversation. “You tell the British public that their kiddies have all been injected with some sort of nanoparticles, you’ll start a panic that will turn into a mass stampede,” he said.

“Better that than the streets filled with corpses,” Blunt muttered.

“And how do you know that Scorpia won’t throw the switch anyway?” Kellner continued. “If you go on television and announce you’re evacuating the capital, maybe they’ll decide to go ahead with their threat a few hours early.”

“There is no alternative,” Sir Graham said. “We can’t leave the children in danger. If we do nothing...” He shook his head. “The nation would never forgive us.”

Alex glanced at the prime minister sitting at the far end of the table. He seemed to have shrunk in the last few minutes. There was even less colour in his face than there had been when the meeting started. The deputy prime minister was chewing furiously; the foreign secretary was polishing his glasses. Everyone was waiting for the three men to make a decision, but they looked completely out of their depth. The prime minister glanced from Kellner to Adair.

At last he spoke. “I think Mark is right.”

“Prime Minister...” Sir Graham began. “If we had more time, maybe we could do something. But we have just over twenty-four hours. And it’s true. If we go public, we’ll terrify people. We’ll also alert Scorpia. Thanks to

—”the prime minister nodded briefly in Alex’s direction but seemed unwilling to mention his name—“we know what this weapon is that we’re fighting. Invisible Sword. That’s the only advantage we have. We can’t risk losing that by going on TV.”

“So what are we going to do?” the deputy prime minister demanded.

Mark Kellner turned to Dr Stephenson. There was a dull light in his eyes, magnified by his round, wire-framed glasses. Alex knew his mind was already made up. “Satellite dishes,” he said.

“Yes.” Dr Stephenson nodded.

“You said they would be quite big. Would we be able to recognize them?”

Dr Stephenson thought briefly. “I suppose they could be disguised,” she said slowly. “Lots of buildings in London have satellite dishes for one reason or another. But I’m sure it would be possible to find out if they weren’t meant to be there.”

“And you think they’d have to be high up.”

“Yes, probably. I’d say about one hundred metres. But that’s only a rough guess.”

“That would make it easier.” Kellner had forgotten that only a few minutes ago he had doubted the very existence of Invisible Sword. Once again he was in control. “If you’re right, we’re looking for unauthorized satellite dishes that have been mounted on any tall structures in the last two or three months,” he announced.

“All we have to do is find them and disconnect them. At the same time, we can find out exactly who received inoculations developed by Consanto. Every single name and address. That may also give us a clue as to where these dishes are located—which areas of London.”

“Forgive me, Prime Minister.” Sir Graham was exasperated. “You say it would be difficult to evacuate London.

But what’s being suggested here—it’s impossible. A vast game of hide-and-seek, and we have no idea how many we’re looking for. If even one of these dishes remains undetected, children will still die.”

"We have no alternative," Kellner insisted. "If we go public with this, the children will die anyway."

"I can have twenty thousand officers working around the clock," the police chief said. "The Metropolitan Police. The Home Counties. I can bring in every man and woman in the south of England."

"We can supply troops." This was a soldier's contribution.

"And you think the sight of all these people climbing up and down buildings won't panic people?" Sir Graham exclaimed.

The prime minister raised his hands for silence. "We'll start the search at once," he ordered. "We'll keep it low-key; we can say it's a terrorist alert. It doesn't matter what we say. No one has to know."

"They won't be hard to find," Kellner muttered. "There can't be that many tall buildings in London. All we're looking for is a dish stuck on the side."

"And there is one other possibility," the prime minister added. He glanced at Blunt. "This woman, Julia Rothman. She knows where the dishes are located. Can you find her?"

Blunt showed no emotion at all. He didn't look at anyone in the room. His eyes were empty slits. "It is possible," he said. "We can try."

"Then I suggest you get on to it straight away."

"Very well, Prime Minister."

Blunt got to his feet. Sir Graham nodded and Alex stood up too. He was suddenly feeling very tired, as if he had been in this room for days.

"It's been very good to finally meet you, Alex," the prime minister said. "Thank you for all you've done."

He could have been thanking Alex for serving tea and biscuits. A moment later Alex was forgotten. He and Blunt left the room.

Alex knew what they would want him to do.

He said nothing as he and Blunt were driven back to Liverpool Street. Blunt didn't speak either, apart from once, just as they were pulling out of Downing Street.

"You did very well in there, Alex," he said.

"Thank you."

It was the first time the head of MI6 Special Operations had ever complimented him.

And finally they entered the room on the sixteenth floor, the office Alex knew all too well. Mrs Jones was waiting for them. It was the first time Alex had seen her since he had tried to kill her. She looked exactly the same as he always remembered her. It was as if nothing had happened between them. She was dressed in black, her legs crossed. She was even sucking one of her peppermint sweets.

There was a brief silence as Alex came in.

"Hello, Alex," she said.

"Mrs Jones." Alex felt uncomfortable, unsure what to say. "I'm sorry about what happened," he muttered.

"I think there's something you should know, Alex. It's important." She glanced at Blunt. "Did you tell him?"

"No."

She sighed and turned back to Alex. "I know you think you took a shot at me, but you didn't. We've worked out the angles. The bullet wouldn't have come close. You were less than two metres away from me and there was no way you could have missed accidentally, so—as far as I can see—something stopped you at the last second.

As much as you hate me—and I suppose you've every right to—you weren't able to shoot me in cold blood."

"I don't hate you," Alex said. It was true. He felt nothing.

"Well, you don't need to hate yourself either. Whatever Scorpia may have told you, you're not one of them."

"Shall we get down to business?"

Blunt took his place behind his desk. Briefly he outlined what had happened at Cobra. "They've made all the wrong decisions," he concluded. "They're going to look for the dishes—as if they have any hope of finding them. They think an evacuation would be too difficult."

"Kellner." Mrs Jones spoke the name with a heavy voice.

"Of course. The prime minister always does what he says. And the trouble is, Kellner's completely out of his depth. It seems to me we have only one hope."

"You want me to go back," Alex said.

It was obvious. Blunt had been told to find Julia Rothman. But he had already admitted that he didn't know where she was. Nobody did. Only Alex might be able to find her. He had a phone number; they were expecting his call.

"They'll know I failed," he said. "At least, they'll know I was taken prisoner by you."

"You could escape," Mrs Jones suggested. "Scorpia won't know if I'm alive or dead. You could tell them you killed me and that you managed to escape from us later."

"They might not believe it."

"You'll have to make them." Mrs Jones hesitated. "I know it's a lot to ask, Alex," she went on. "After everything that's happened, I'm sure you never want to see any of us again. But you know the stakes now. If there was any other way..."

"There isn't," Alex said. He had made up his mind before he had even left Downing Street. "I can call them. I don't know if it'll work; I don't know if they'll even answer. But I can try."

"We'll just have to hope that they take you to Julia Rothman. It's our only chance of finding her, and maybe she'll lead us to the dishes." Blunt reached out and pressed a button on his phone. "Please could you send Smithers up," he murmured into the machine.

Smithers. Alex almost smiled. It struck him that Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones had already planned this.

They had known they would be sending him back and they had already told Smithers to come up with whatever gadgets he would need. That was typical of MI6. They were always one step ahead. Not just planning the future but controlling it.

"This is what I want you to do," Blunt explained. "We'll arrange an escape for you. If we make it spectacular enough, we can even get it on the evening news. You'll make the call to Scorpia. You can tell them that you shot Mrs Jones. You'll sound nervous, on the edge of panic; you'll ask them to bring you in."

"You think they'll come?"

"Let's hope so. If you can somehow make contact with Julia Rothman, you may be able to find out where the dishes are located. And the moment you know, you get in contact with us. We'll do the rest."

"You'll have to be very careful," Mrs Jones warned. "Scorpia aren't stupid. They sent you to us and when you go back, they'll be very suspicious indeed. You'll be searched, Alex. Everything you do and say will be examined. You'll have to lie to them. Do you think you can get away with it?"

"How will I get in touch with you?" Alex asked. "I doubt if they'll let me use a telephone."

As if in answer to his question, the door opened and Smithers came in. In a strange way Alex was pleased to see him. Smithers was so fat and jolly that it was hard to believe he was part of MI6 at all. He was wearing a tweed suit that was at least fifty years out of date. With his bald head, black moustache, several chins and his open, smiling face, he could have been anybody's uncle, the sort who liked to do magic tricks at parties.

And yet, for once, even he was serious. "Alex, my dear boy," he exclaimed. "This is all a bit of a mess, isn't it!

How are you keeping? Are you in good shape?"

"Hello, Mr Smithers," Alex said.

"I'm sorry to hear you've been tangling with Scorpia. They're a very, very nasty piece of work. Worse than the Russians ever were. Some of the things they get up to—well, quite frankly it's criminal." He was out of breath and sat down heavily in an empty seat. "Sabotage and corruption. Intelligence and assassination. Whatever next?"

"What have you got for us, Smithers?" Blunt asked.

"Well, you always ask the impossible, Mr Blunt, and this time it's even worse. There are all sorts of gadgets I'd like to give young Alex. I'm always working on new ideas. I've just finished work on a pair of Rollerblades.

The blades are actually hidden in the wheels and they'll cut through anything. I've got a very nice Rubik's Cube hand grenade. But as I understand it, these people aren't going to let him keep anything when he turns up again.

If there's anything remotely suspicious, they're going to examine it, and then they'll know he's working with us."

"He needs to have a homing device," Mrs Jones said. "We have to be able to track him wherever he goes. And he has to be able to signal to us when it's time for us to move in."

"I know," Smithers said. He reached into his pocket. "And I think I may have come up with the answer. It's the last thing they'd expect ... but at the same time, it's exactly what you'd expect a teenage boy to have."

He took out a clear plastic bag and inside it Alex saw a small metal and plastic object. He couldn't help smiling.

The last time he had seen one of these had been at the dentist's.

It was a brace. For his teeth.

"We may have to make a few adjustments, but it should fit snugly into your mouth." Smithers tapped the bag.

"The wire going over your teeth is transparent, so it won't be noticed. It's actually a looped radio aerial. The brace will begin transmitting the moment you put it in." He turned the bag over in his pudgy fingers and pointed to the bottom. "There's a little switch here," he continued. "You activate it with your tongue. As soon as you do that, you send out a distress signal and we can come rushing in."

Mrs Jones nodded. "Well done, Smithers. That's first-rate."

Smithers sighed. "I feel really terrible sending Alex in without any weapons. And I've got a marvellous new device for him too! I've been working on a Palm Organizer that's actually a flamethrower. I call it the Napalm Organizer—"

"No weapons," Blunt said.

"We can't take the risk," Mrs Jones agreed.

"You're right." Smithers dragged himself slowly to his feet. "Just take care, Alex, old bean. You know how I worry about you. Don't you dare get yourself killed. I want to see you again."

He left, closing the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Mrs Jones said.

"No." Alex knew she was right. Even if he could persuade Scorpia that he had carried out his assignment, they still wouldn't trust him. They would search him from head to toe.

"Activate the tracking device as soon as you've found the dishes," Blunt ordered.

"It's always possible they won't take you to them," Mrs Jones added. "In that event, if you can't slip away, if you feel yourself to be in any danger, activate it anyway. We'll send special forces in to pull you out."

That surprised Alex. She had never shown very much concern for him in the past. It was as if his breaking into her flat had somehow changed things between them. He glanced at her sitting bolt upright, neat and contained, chewing slowly on the peppermint, and guessed that there was something she wasn't telling him. Well, that made two of them.

"Are you quite sure about this, Alex?" she asked.

"Yes." Alex paused. "Can you really make them believe I escaped?"

Blunt gave a thin, humourless smile. "Oh yes," he said. "We'll make them believe it."

It happened in London and made the six o'clock news.

A car had been driving at speed on the Westway, one of the main roads leading out of the city. The car was high up—this part of the road was suspended on huge concrete pillars. All of a sudden it lost control. Witnesses saw it swerve left and right, careering into the other traffic. At least a dozen other cars were involved in the resulting pile-up. There was a Fiat Uno, crumpled up like paper. A BMW had one side torn off. A van full of flowers, unable to stop in time, crashed into them. Its doors swung open and suddenly—bizarrely—the road was covered with roses and chrysanthemums. A taxi, trying to avoid the chaos, hit the crash barrier and catapulted over the edge, smashing into an upstairs window of someone's house.

It was a miracle nobody was killed, although a dozen people were rushed to nearby hospitals. The aftermath of the accident had been recorded by traffic policemen in a helicopter, and there it was on television. The road was closed. Smoke was still rising from a burnt-out car. There was shattered metal and glass everywhere.

A number of witnesses were interviewed and they described what they had seen. There had been a boy in the front car, they said, the one that had started it all. They had seen him get out the moment it was all over. He had run back down the road and disappeared through the traffic. There had been a man—in a dark suit and sunglasses—who had tried to follow him. But the man had obviously been hurt. He had been limping. The boy had escaped.

Two hours later the road was still closed. The police said they were looking for the boy urgently, to interview him. But apart from the fact that he was about fourteen years old and dressed in black, there was no description.

They didn't have a name. The traffic in west London had come to a standstill. It would take days to clear up the damage.

Sitting in a hotel room in Mayfair, Julia Rothman saw the report and her eyes narrowed. She knew who the boy was, of course. It couldn't be anyone else. She wondered what had happened. More to the point, she wondered when Alex Rider would get in touch.

In fact, it wasn't until seven o'clock that evening that Alex made the call. He was in a phone box near Marble Arch. He was already wearing the brace, giving his mouth time to get used to it. But still he found it hard to stop slurring his words.

A man answered. "Yes?"

"This is Alex Rider."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in a call box on the Edgware Road."

This was true. Alex was dressed once again in the black ninja outfit which Scorpia had supplied him with. The phone box was outside a Lebanese restaurant. He had no doubt that Scorpia would be using sophisticated equipment to trace the call. He wondered how long it would take them to reach him.

He thought back to the car crash. He had to admit that MI6 had stage-managed it brilliantly. No fewer than twenty cars had been involved and they had only had a couple of hours, working with a team of stuntmen, to get it right. Not a single member of the public had been injured. But looking at the television footage and hearing the reports, Scorpia would have to admit that it looked real. That was what Blunt had said from the start. The bigger the pile-up, the less reason there would be for doubt. The front page of the Evening Standard's final edition carried a photograph of the taxi embedded in the window of the house.

None of this mattered to the voice at the other end of the line.

"Is the woman dead?" it asked. The woman. Scorpia didn't call her Mrs Jones any more. But then, corpses don't need names.

"Yes," Alex answered.

When they came to him, they would find the Kahr P9 back in his pocket with the one bullet fired. If they examined his hands (Blunt was sure they would) there would be traces of gunpowder on his fingers. And there was a bloodstain on the sleeve of his shirt. The same blood type as Mrs Jones. She had supplied the sample.

"What happened?"

“They caught me on the way out. They took me to Liverpool Street and asked me questions. This afternoon they were taking me somewhere else but I managed to get away.” Alex allowed a little panic to enter his voice.

He was a teenager; he had just made his first kill; and he was on the run. “Look. You said you’d bring me in once I’d done it. I’m in a phone box. Everyone’s looking for me. I want to see Nile...”

A brief pause.

“All right. Make your way to Bank tube station. There’s an intersection. Seven roads. Be outside the main entrance at nine o’clock exactly and we’ll come and collect you.”

“Who will—” Alex began. But the phone had gone dead.

He hung up and stepped out of the telephone box. Two police cars sped past, their lights flashing. But they weren’t interested in him. Alex took his bearings and started off, heading east. Bank tube station was on the other side of London and it would take him at least an hour to walk there. He had no money on him and couldn’t risk being arrested for fare-dodging on a bus. And when he got there—seven roads! Scorpia were being careful. They could come for him from any direction. If this was a set-up and MI6 were following him, they would have to divide themselves seven ways.

He set off along the crowded pavements, keeping to the shadows, trying not to think what he was letting himself in for. The night was already drawing in. He could see a hard, white moon, dead in the sky. Everything would end, one way or another, the next day. Just over twenty hours remained until Scorpia’s deadline.

It was his deadline too.

That was the one thing he hadn’t told Mrs Jones.

He remembered what had happened on Malagosto. On his last day there he had been sent to see a psychiatrist—an inquisitive, middle-aged man—who had put him through certain tests and then produced his medical report.

What was it that Dr Steiner had said? He was a little run-down. He needed more vitamins.

And he had given Alex an injection.

Alex had absolutely no doubt that he had been injected with the same nanoshells that were about to kill thousands of other children in London. He could almost feel them in his bloodstream, millions of golden bullets swirling around in his heart, waiting to release their deadly contents. There was a sour taste in his mouth.

Scorpia had tricked him. They had been laughing at him from the very start. Even as Mrs Rothman sipped her champagne in Positano, she must have been thinking of how to get rid of him.

He hadn’t told Mrs Jones because he didn’t want her to know. He didn’t want anyone to know what a fool he had been. And, at the same time, he was utterly determined. Once the switch was thrown, he would die. But there would be time before that.

Scorpia had told him that it was good to get revenge.

That was exactly what Alex Rider intended to do.

Chapter 17: THE CHURCH OF FORGOTTEN SAINTS

The search had already begun.

Hundreds of men and women were working their way across London, with hundreds more acting as back-up: on the telephone, on computers, searching and cross-referencing, trawling through the records. Government scientists had confirmed Dr Stephenson's prediction that the terahertz dishes would have to be at least one hundred metres above the ground to be effective—and that did indeed make it easier. A search of the city's basements, cellars and twisting alleyways would have been impossible, even for the country's entire police force and army. But they were looking for something that had to be high up and in plain view. The clock was ticking but it could be done.

Every satellite dish in London was noted, photographed, authenticated and then eliminated from the search.

Whenever possible, the original planning application was found and checked against the actual dish itself.

Telecommunications experts had been called in and wherever there was any doubt they were taken up to the relevant floor to see for themselves.

If people were puzzled by the sudden buzz of activity in apartment blocks and offices, nobody said anything.

The few journalists who started to ask questions were quietly pulled aside and threatened with such ferocity that they soon decided there were other, less dangerous stories to pursue. Word went round that there was a crackdown on television licences. And every hour, across the city, more technicians poked and probed, examining the dishes, making sure they had a right to be there.

And then, just after ten o'clock on Thursday morning, six hours before Scorpia's deadline, they found them.

There was a block of flats on the edge of Notting Hill Gate with amazing views over the whole of west London.

It was one of the tallest blocks in the city—famous for both its height and its ugliness. It had been designed in the sixties by an architect who must have been relieved he would never have to live in it.

The roof contained a number of brick structures: the cables for the lifts, air-conditioning units, emergency generators. It was on the side of one of these that the inspectors found three brand-new satellite dishes facing north, south and east.

Nobody knew what they were for. Nobody had any record of their being placed there. Within minutes there were a dozen technicians on the roof and more circling in helicopters. The cables were found to lead to a radio transmitting device, programmed to begin emitting high frequency terahertz beams at exactly four o'clock that afternoon.

Mark Kellner took the phone call at 10 Downing Street.

"We've done it!" he exclaimed. "A block of flats in west London. Three dishes. They're disconnecting them now."

Cobra was still in session. Around the table there was a murmur of disbelief that swelled in volume and became a roar of triumph.

"We're going to keep looking," Kellner said. "There's always a faint chance that Scorpia put other dishes in place as back-up. But if there are any others, we'll find them too. I think we can say that the immediate crisis is over."

At Liverpool Street Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones were also told the news.

"What do you think?" Mrs Jones asked.

Blunt shook his head. "Scorpia are more clever than that. If these dishes have been found, it's only because they were meant to be found."

"So Kellner is wrong again."

"The man's a fool." Blunt glanced at his watch.

"We don't have much time."

Mrs Jones looked at him. "All we have is Alex Rider."

Alex was on the other side of London, a long way from the satellite dishes.

He had been picked up outside Bank Station at the agreed time the night before—but not by car. A scruffy young woman he had never seen before walked past him, whispering two words as she went by, and thrusting a tube ticket into his hand.

"Follow me."

She led him into the station and onto a train. She didn't speak to him again, standing some distance away in the carriage, her eyes vacant, as if she was nothing to do with him. They changed trains twice, waiting until the last moment as the doors slid shut and then suddenly stepping out onto the platform. If anyone were following them, she would see. Finally they emerged at King's Cross Station. She left Alex standing in the street, signalling for him to wait. A few minutes later a taxi pulled up.

Alex Rider?"

"Yes."

"Get in."

It was all done very smoothly. As they moved off, Alex knew that it would have been impossible for any MI6 agents to have followed them. Which was, of course, exactly what Scorpia had planned.

He was taken to a house—a different house to the one he had visited when he first arrived back in London. This one was on the edge of Regent's Park. A man and woman were waiting for him, and he recognized them as the fake Italian parents who had accompanied him through Heathrow. They led him upstairs and showed him into a shabby bedroom with a bathroom attached. There was a late supper waiting for him on a tray. They left him there, locking the door behind them. There was no telephone. Alex checked the window. That was locked too.

And now it was half past one the next day and Alex was sitting on the bed, looking out of the window at the trees and Victorian railings of the park. He was feeling a little sick. He had begun to think that Scorpia simply planned to leave him here until four o'clock, that they wanted him to die with the other children in London.

And that reminded him of the nanoshells which he knew were inside him, resting inside his heart. He remembered the prick of the needle, the smiling face of Dr Steiner as he injected him with death. The thought of it made his skin crawl. Was he really doomed to spend the last hours of his life here, in this room, sitting on an unmade bed, alone?

The door opened.

Nile walked in, followed by Julia Rothman.

She was wearing an expensive coat, grey with a white fur collar, buttoned up to her neck—another designer label. Her black hair was immaculate, her make-up as much a mask as the ones that had been worn at her party at the Widow's Palace. Her smile was a brilliant red. Her eyes seemed more dazzling than ever, highlighted by perfectly applied black eyeliner.

"Alex!" she exclaimed. She sounded genuinely delighted to see him, but Alex knew now that everything about her was fake: nothing was to be trusted.

"I wondered if you were going to come," Alex commented.

"Of course I was going to come, my dear. It's just that this is rather a busy day. How are you, Alex? I am so pleased to see you."

"Did you really kill her?" Nile asked. He was casually dressed in a loose jacket and jeans, trainers and a white sweatshirt.

Mrs Rothman scowled. "Nile, do you have to be so direct?" She shrugged. "He's talking about Mrs Jones, of course. And I suppose we do need to know what happened. The mission was a success?"

"Yes." Alex nodded. This was the most dangerous part. He knew he couldn't talk too much; he was afraid of giving himself away. And he was horribly conscious of the brace. It fitted well, but it had to be distorting his speech, at least a bit. The wire across his teeth was transparent but, even so, surely Mrs Rothman would notice it.

"So what happened?" Nile asked.

"I managed to get inside her flat. It all went exactly like you said. I used the gun..."

"And then?"

"I took the lift back down and I was just on my way out when the two guys behind the desk grabbed me." Alex had spent half the night rehearsing this. "I don't know how they found out it was me. But before I could do anything they had me on the floor with my hands cuffed behind my back."

"Go on." Mrs Rothman was gazing at him. Her eyes could have been trying to suck him in.

"They took me somewhere. A cell." This part was easier—Alex was actually telling a version of the truth. "It was underneath Liverpool Street. They left me there overnight and then Blunt saw me the next day."

"What did he say?"

"Not a lot. He knew I was working for you. They'd got satellite photographs of me arriving at Malagosto."

Nile glanced at Mrs Rothman. "That makes sense," he said. "I've always had a feeling we've been under surveillance."

"He didn't want to know very much," Alex went on. "He didn't really want to talk to me. He said I was going to be questioned somewhere out of London. I was left hanging around there for a bit, then a car came to collect me."

"You were handcuffed?" Mrs Rothman asked.

"Not this time. That was their mistake. It was just an ordinary car. There was the driver in the front, and an MI6

man in the back with me. I didn't know where they were taking me and I didn't want to go. I didn't really care what happened. I didn't even care if I was killed. I waited until they got a bit of speed up and then I threw myself at the driver. I managed to put my hands over his eyes. There was nothing much he could do. He lost control and the car crashed."

"Quite a few cars crashed," Mrs Rothman remarked.

"Yeah. But I was lucky. Everything sort of went upside down, but the next thing I knew, we'd stopped and I was able to get out and run away. Eventually I reached a phone box and called the number you gave me—and here I am."

Nile had been watching him closely through all this. "How did it feel, Alex?" he asked. "Killing Mrs Jones."

"I didn't feel anything."

Nile nodded. "It was the same for me, the first time. But you will learn to enjoy it. That'll come with time."

"You've done very well, Alex." Mrs Rothman spoke the words, but she still sounded doubtful. "I have to say, I'm quite astonished by your daring escape. I saw it on the news and I could hardly believe it. But you've certainly passed the test. You really are one of us."

"Does that mean you'll take me back to Venice?"

"Not quite yet." Mrs Rothman thought for a moment and Alex could see she was coming to a decision. "We're just at the critical point in a certain operation," she revealed. "It might interest you to see the climax; it's going to be quite spectacular. What do you think?"

Alex shrugged. He mustn't look too keen. "I don't mind," he said.

"You met Dr Liebermann; you were there at Consanto when dear Nile dealt with him. It seems only right that you should see the fruits of his handiwork." She smiled again. "I'd like to have you with me, at the end."

So you can watch me die, Alex thought. "I'd like to be there," he replied.

Then her eyes narrowed and the smile seemed to freeze. "But I'm afraid we're going to have to search you,"

she said. "I do trust you, of course. But as you'll learn when you've been with Scorpia for a while, we don't leave anything to chance. You were taken prisoner by M16. It's always possible that you were somehow contaminated without knowing it. So before we leave here, I want you to go into the bathroom with Nile. He'll give you a thorough examination. And we've got you a complete change of clothes. Everything has to come off, Alex. It's all a bit embarrassing, I know, but I'm sure you'll understand."

"I've nothing to hide," Alex said, but he couldn't help running his tongue over the brace. He was certain she'd see it.

"Of course you haven't. I'm just being overcautious."

"Let's do it." Nile jerked a thumb in the direction of the bathroom. He seemed amused by the whole idea.

Twenty minutes later Alex and Nile came downstairs. Alex was now dressed in loose-fitting jeans and a round-necked jersey. Nile had brought the clothes with him, along with fresh socks, trainers and pants. Mrs Jones had been right. If he'd had so much as a penny on him, Nile would have found it. Alex had been thoroughly searched.

But Nile hadn't noticed the brace. Alex's mouth was the one place he hadn't looked.

"Well?" Mrs Rothman asked. She was in a hurry to leave.

"He's clean," Nile answered.

"Good. Then we can go."

There was a grandfather clock in the hall, standing in the corner on the black and white tiled floor. As Alex moved towards the front door, it struck the hour. Two o'clock.

"Is that the time already?" Mrs Rothman said. She reached out and stroked Alex's cheek. "You have just two hours left, Alex."

"Two hours until what?" he asked.

"In two hours' time you'll know everything."

She opened the door.

There was a car waiting for them outside. It took them across London, heading south. They drove round the Aldwych and over Waterloo Bridge, and for a moment Alex gazed out over one of the most startling views of the capital: the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, with the Millennium Wheel on the opposite bank. What would it look like two hours from now? Alex tried to imagine the ambulances and police cars screaming across London, the crowds staring in disbelief, the undersized bodies strewn over the pavements. It would be like another world war—but without a single shot being fired.

And then they were on the south bank of the river, making their way through Waterloo, heading east. The buildings they passed became older and dustier. It was as if they had travelled not just a few miles but a few hundred years. Alex sat in the back, next to Nile. Mrs Rothman was in the front with a blank-faced driver.

Nobody spoke. It was warm inside the car—the sun was shining—but Alex could feel a tension that made the air cold. He was certain they were heading for some high point where Invisible Sword must be concealed, but he had no idea what to expect. An office block? Perhaps a building under construction? He stared out of the window, his head pressed against the glass, trying to stay calm.

They stopped.

The car had pulled up on a strange, empty stretch of road that ran for about fifteen metres before coming to a dead end. Mrs Rothman and Nile climbed out of the car and Alex followed, examining his surroundings with a sinking heart. It looked as if they hadn't taken him to the dishes after all. There were no tall buildings in sight, not for at least a mile around. The street—almost as wide as it was long—ran between two rows of dilapidated shops, the lower floors boarded up, the windows broken and discoloured. The street itself was covered with rubbish: scraps of newspaper, dented cans and old crisp packets.

But it was the building at the end that commanded his attention. The street led to a church that would have been more suited to Rome or Venice than London. It had obviously been abandoned long ago and had deteriorated badly, yet still it struggled to be magnificent. Two huge, cracked pillars supported a triangular roof over the main entrance. Marble steps led up to huge doors made of solid bronze, but green now rather than gold. The great bulk of the church rose up behind, surmounted by a dome which glinted in the afternoon sun. Statues lined the steps and stood dotted

across the roof. But they had been brutalized by time and the elements. Some were missing arms; many had no faces. Once they had been saints and angels. Two hundred years standing in London had turned them into cripples.

"Why are we here?" Alex asked.

Mrs Rothman was standing next to him, looking up at the church. "I thought you'd like to witness the conclusion of Invisible Sword."

"I don't know anything about Invisible Sword." Without giving himself away, Alex was searching for any sign of the satellite dishes. But there didn't seem to be anything on the dome and, anyway, as impressive as it was, it wasn't tall enough. The dishes had to be higher up. "What is this place?"

Mrs Rothman looked at him curiously. "You know, Alex, I'd swear there was something different about you."

Alex quietly closed his mouth, hiding the brace. He looked at her quizzically.

"Nile? Did you search him from top to bottom?"

"Yes. Just like you told me to."

"I would've thought you'd have trusted me by now," Alex protested, but this time he looked away so she wouldn't see his teeth. "I did exactly what you told me to. And I nearly got killed."

"I don't trust anyone, Alex. Not even Nile." She paused. "Since you ask, this building is the Church of Forgotten Saints. It's not actually a church; it's an oratory. It was built in the nineteenth century by a community of Catholic priests living in the area. They were rather odd. They worshipped a collection of saints who have all fallen into obscurity. You'd be amazed how many saints there are who we've completely forgotten about. St Fiacre, for example, is the patron saint of gardeners and taxi drivers. That must keep him busy! St Ambrose looks after bee-keepers, and where would tailors be without St Homobonus? Did you know that undertakers and perfume makers both have their own saints? They were worshipped here too. I suppose it's not surprising the church fell into disuse. It was bombed in the war and it's been empty ever since. Scorpia took it over a few years ago. As you'll see, we've made one or two interesting adjustments. Do you want to come inside?"

Alex shrugged. "Whatever you say."

He had no choice. For some reason, Julia Rothman had chosen to bring him here, and presumably he would still be here when the terahertz beams were fired across London. He glanced at the dome again, wondering if the surface would be enough to protect him. He doubted it.

The three of them walked forward. The car had left. Alex looked at the shops on either side. Not a single one was occupied. He wondered if he was being watched. It occurred to him that anyone wanting to enter the church would have to come this way, and it would be easy enough to keep them under surveillance with hidden cameras. They reached the main entrance, which sensed their arrival and opened electronically. That was interesting. Mrs Rothman had spoken of adjustments and it was already clear that the oratory wasn't quite as derelict as it first appeared.

They entered a grand hall, rectangular in shape, that served as an antechamber to the main body of the church.

Everything was grey: the huge flagstones, the ceiling, the stone pillars that supported it. Alex looked around him as his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light. There were circular windows on both sides but the glass was so thick it seemed to block out most of the daylight rather than allow it in. Everything was faded and dusty. Two statues—more forgotten saints?—stood either side of a cracked and broken font. There was a faint smell of damp in the air. It was easy to believe that nobody had been here for fifty-odd years. Alex coughed and listened to the sound travel up. The chamber was utterly silent, and there seemed to be no obvious way forward. The street was behind them; a solid wall blocked the way ahead. But then Julia Rothman walked across the floor.

Her stiletto heels rapped against the stone, creating echoes that flitted into the shadows.

Her movement had been some sort of signal. There was a loud buzz and, overhead, a series of arc lamps—

concealed in the walls and ceiling—flashed on. Beams of brilliant white light crashed down from every direction. At the same time, five panels slid silently open, one after the other. They were part of the wall, built into it, disguised to look like brick. Now Alex saw that they were in fact solid steel. More light spilled out and with it came the sound of men moving, of machinery, of frantic activity.

"Welcome to Invisible Sword," Mrs Rothman announced, and in that moment Alex knew why she had brought him here. She was proud of what she had done. She couldn't hide the pleasure in her voice. She wanted him to see.

Alex stepped through the opening and into a scene he would never forget.

It was a classical church, just like the monastery on Malagosto. Scorpia seemed to enjoy cloaking itself in religion. The floor was made up of black and white tiles. There were stained-glass windows, a richly carved wooden pulpit, even a few old pews. The remains of an organ clung to one wall but, looking at the pipes, some broken, others missing, Alex knew that it would never play again. The dome curved above his head, the underside painted with more saints, men and women holding the various objects with which they were associated: furniture, shoes, library books and loaves of bread. All of them had been forgotten. All of them were frozen together in a single great tableau overhead.

The church had been filled with electronic equipment: computers, TV monitors, industrial lights and a series of switches and levers that couldn't have been more out of place. Two steel gantries had been built, one on either side, with armed guards positioned at intervals. There must have been twenty or thirty people involved in the operation, at least half of them carrying machine guns. As Alex took all this in, a voice rang out, amplified through speakers bolted into the walls.

"Six minutes until launch. Six minutes and counting..."

Alex knew that he had arrived at the centre of the web, and even as he stared, his tongue travelled to the roof of his mouth and pressed the switch which Smithers had built into his brace. Mark Kellner, the prime minister's director of communications, had got it wrong again. Scorpia hadn't attached the terahertz dishes to any tall building.

They had attached them to a hot-air balloon.

Six men dressed in dark overall were inflating it. There was plenty of floor space, and the dome was as high as a six-storey building. The balloon was painted blue and white. Once released, it would blend in with the sky.

How were they going to release it? Alex wondered. The church was completely enclosed by the dome. Even so, that had to be their plan. There was a frame under the balloon with a single burner pointing upwards, and, beneath that, a platform about twenty metres square. The balloon was strangely old-fashioned, like something out of a Victorian adventure story. The platform couldn't have been more high-tech, though, built out of some sort of lightweight plastic with a low railing to protect the equipment it carried.

Alex recognized the equipment instantly. There were four dishes, one in each corner, facing the four points of the compass. They were dull silver in colour, about three metres in diameter, with thin metal rods forming a triangle that protruded from the centre. Wires connected the dishes to a series of complicated-looking boxes which took up most of the space in the centre of the platform. Black pipes ran up to the burner, carrying propane gas from the tanks which were stacked next to the boxes. The balloon was almost inflated. It had been lying spread out on the ground but even as Alex watched, the air in the envelope was heated by three men using a second burner device and it began to lift itself limply up.

More men ran forward to hold the platform steady. There were two ropes, one at each end. Alex saw that the whole thing had been tethered to a pair of iron rings set in the floor. Now he understood what Scorpia intended to do. Julia Rothman must have anticipated that government scientists would work out how the footballers at Heathrow Airport had died. She had known that they would be searching London for the satellite dishes. So she had kept them hidden until the last moment. The hot-air balloon would lift them up into the air. They would only need to stay there for a few minutes. By the time anyone realized what was happening, it would be too late. The golden nanoshells would have dissolved and thousands of children would be dead.

He noticed that Nile had taken off his jacket and was strapping something to his back. It was a leather harness with two lethal-looking weapons: not quite swords, not quite daggers, but something in between. Alex remembered how Dr Liebermann had died and knew that Nile was an expert at iaido, the ninja art of sword fighting. He could slice with the swords or he could throw them. Either way, he was lightning fast—Alex knew he could deliver death in an instant.

There was nothing he could do but stand and watch. He had no gadgets, no hidden weapons. Mrs Rothman might have bought the story of his capture and escape, but her eyes were still on him. In truth they had never wavered. She was still suspicious. If he so much as sneezed without her permission, she would give the order and he would be cut down.

How long had it been since he had activated the homing device? Sixty seconds? Maybe more. Alex felt the wire running across his teeth and tried to imagine the signal being transmitted to MI6. How long would it take them to arrive?

Mrs Rothman stepped closer and laid a hand on his shoulder. Her fingers caressed the side of his neck. She ran her tongue, small and moist, over her lips.

"Let me explain to you what we're doing here, Alex," she began. "As a member of Scorpia, I'm sure you'd like to know."

"Are you going for a balloon ride?" Alex asked.

"No. I'm not going anywhere." She smiled. "Two days ago we made certain demands. These demands were directed against the American government but we made it clear that if they did not obey, it would be the British who would suffer the consequences. The deadline runs out"—she looked at her watch—"in less than fifteen minutes. The Americans have not done as we asked. And now it is time for the punishment to begin."

"What are you going to do?" Alex asked. He couldn't keep the horror out of his voice because, of course, he already knew.

"In a few minutes the balloon will be completely inflated and we will raise it above this church. The ropes will keep it tethered at exactly one hundred metres, and when it reaches that point, the machinery which you can see on the platform will activate immediately. High frequency terahertz beams will then be transmitted over London for exactly two minutes and, at that moment, I'm afraid a very large number of people will die."

"Why?" Alex could barely speak. "What did you ask the Americans? What did you want them to do?"

"As a matter of fact, we didn't want them to do anything. The demands we made were completely ridiculous.

We asked them to disarm; we told them to pay a billion dollars. We knew they'd never agree."

"Then why ask?"

"Because what our client really wants is revenge. Revenge for the constant interference and bullying of the British and the Americans in matters that don't concern them. What he wants is to ensure that the special friendship between the two countries is destroyed for ever. And this is how it's going to happen.

"I'm afraid that a great many people are about to die in London. The deaths will be sudden and totally unexpected. It'll be as if they've been struck down by an invisible sword. The whole country will be in shock.

And then the news will come out: they died because the Americans wouldn't agree to our demands. They died because the Americans refused to help the ally who always stands by them. Can you imagine what the newspapers will say? Can you imagine what people will think? By tomorrow morning the British will hate the Americans.

"And then, Alex, in a few months, Invisible Sword will strike again—but next time it will be in New York. And next time our demands will be more reasonable. We'll ask for less and the Americans will give us what we want, because they will have seen what happened in London and they won't want it to happen again. They'll have no choice. And that will be the end of the British-American alliance. Don't you see? The Americans couldn't care less about the British. They've only ever been concerned about themselves. That's what everyone will say, and you have no idea how much hatred will be created. One country humiliated; the other crushed.

And Scorpia will have earned a hundred million pounds along the way."

She paused, as if waiting for him to congratulate her. Alex was meant to be a member of her organization, the newest recruit. His father would have

been glad to stand at her side. But Alex couldn't do it. He simply couldn't find it in himself. He couldn't even pretend.

"You can't do it!" he whispered. "You can't kill children just to get rich."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he knew he had made a mistake. Julia Rothman's reaction was as fast as a snake ... as fast as a scorpion. One moment, that soft, casual smile had been on her lips; the next, she was rigid, alert, her whole consciousness focused on Alex.

Nile looked over, sensing something was wrong. Alex waited for the axe to fall. And then it came.

"Children?" Mrs Rothman murmured. "I never said anything about children."

"But there will be children." Alex tried frantically to backtrack. "Adults and children."

"No, Alex." Mrs Rothman seemed almost amused. "You know that children are the targets. I never told you that; so somebody else must have."

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

She was examining him minutely. Closing in on him. And suddenly she saw it. "I thought there was something different about you," she snapped. "What's that you've got on your teeth?"

It was too late to hide it. Alex opened his mouth. "I wear a brace."

"You weren't wearing a brace in Positano."

"I didn't have it in."

"Take it out."

"It doesn't come out."

"It will—with a hammer." Alex had no choice. He reached into his mouth and took out the piece of plastic. Nile moved closer, his eyes full of curiosity. "Let me see it, Alex."

Like a naughty boy caught eating gum, Alex held out his hand. The brace was resting in his palm. And it was obvious it was no ordinary brace. They could see some of the circuitry leading to the switch he had activated.

Had he pressed it in time? "Drop it!" Mrs Rothman commanded. Alex let the brace fall to the floor and she stepped forward. Her foot came down on it and Alex heard the sound of breaking plastic as she ground it into the tiles. When she removed her foot the brace was cracked in half, the wire bent. If it had been transmitting before, it certainly wasn't now.

Mrs Rothman turned to Nile. "You're a fool, Nile. I thought I told you to search him from top to bottom."

"His mouth..." Nile didn't know what to say. "It was the one place I didn't look."

But she had already turned back to Alex. "You didn't do it, did you, Alex?" Her voice was full of scorn. "You didn't kill her. Mrs Jones is still alive."

Alex said nothing. Mrs Rothman stared at him for what seemed like an eternity, and then she struck. She was faster and stronger than he would have guessed. Her hand slammed into the side of his face. The sound of it echoed all around. Alex staggered back, dazed. His whole head was ringing and he could feel his cheek glowing red. Mrs Rothman signalled and two guards with machine guns stepped forward to stand next to him, one on either side.

"We may be expecting company," she announced in a loud, clear voice. "I want units three, four and five to take up defensive positions."

"Units three, four and five to the perimeter." An amplified voice relayed the command and twenty of the men ran forward, their feet stamping on the metal gantries, heading for the front of the church.

Mrs Rothman gazed at Alex with eyes that had lost their disguise. They were utterly cruel. "Mrs Jones may be alive," she spat, "but you won't be. You have very little time left to live, Alex. Why do you think I brought you here? It's because I want to see it for myself. I had a special reason to want to kill you, and believe it or not, my dear, you're already dead."

She looked past him. The balloon was fully inflated, floating in the space between the floor and the dome. The platform with its deadly cargo was underneath it, hovering a metre above the ground. The ropes were ready.

The dishes were set to automatic.

"Start the launch," Mrs Rothman commanded. "It's time London saw the power of Invisible Sword."

Chapter 18: HIGH RESOLUTION

Launch ... status red. Launch ... status red." The disembodied voice rang out as one of the Scorpia technicians, sitting in front of a bank of machinery, reached out and pressed a button.

There was a single metallic click and then the hum of machinery as a wheel turned somewhere overhead. Alex looked up. At first glance it seemed to him that the saints and angels were flying apart, as if they had come to life and were drifting down to the pews to pray. Then, with a gasp, he saw what was actually happening. The entire roof was moving. The dome of the oratory had been reconstructed with hidden hydraulic arms that were slowly pulling it open. A crack appeared and widened. He could see the sky. An inch at a time, the great dome was folding back, splitting into two halves. Mrs Rothman was staring upwards, her face filled with delight.

Only now did Alex see how much planning had gone into this operation. The entire church had been adapted—it must have cost millions—for this single moment.

And nobody had guessed. The police and the army had been searching all over London, examining every structure at least a hundred metres high. But the dishes had been hidden—at ground level. Only now would the hot-air balloon carry them above the city. Certainly someone would notice it. But by the time they made their way to this desolate area, it would be too late. The dishes would have done their work. Thousands of children would have died.

And Alex would be one of them. Mrs Rothman hadn't killed him, because she had no need to. She had said it herself: he was already dead.

"Raise the balloon." Mrs Rothman gave the order in a soft voice. But her words were quite clear in the vast space of the church.

The burner under the envelope was alight, sending a red and blue flame shooting up. Two men darted forward and pulled the release mechanism, and at once the platform began to rise. The entire roof had disappeared. It was as if the oratory had been peeled open like an exotic fruit. There was more than enough room for the balloon to begin its journey, and Alex watched it float smoothly up, travelling in a straight line, as if this had been rehearsed. There was no wind. Even the weather seemed to be on Scorpia's side.

Alex looked around him. His face was still smarting where Mrs Rothman had slapped him but he ignored the pain. He was horribly aware of the seconds ticking away, but there was nothing he could do. Nile was watching him with as much hatred as he had ever seen in a man's face. The two samurai swords protruded just above his shoulders, and Alex knew he was itching to use them. He had betrayed Scorpia and, worse, he had betrayed Nile. He had humiliated the man in front of Julia Rothman, and for that Nile would make him pay by cutting him to pieces. He needed only the tiniest excuse. The two armed guards still flanked Alex. Others watched him from the gantries and their positions at the entrance. He was helpless.

And where were MI6? He glanced at the broken pieces of the brace. He wished now that he had activated the trigger the moment he had seen the church. But how could he have known? How could anyone have known?

"Alex, before you die, there's something I want to tell you," Mrs Rothman confided.

"I'm not interested," Alex replied.

"Oh, I think you will be, my dear. Because, you see, it's about your father. And your mother. There's something you ought to know."

Alex didn't want to hear it. And he had come to a decision. He was going to die—but he wouldn't just stand there. Somehow he was going to hurt Julia Rothman. She had lied to him; she had manipulated him. Worse, she had almost made him betray everything he believed in. She had tried to make him part of Scorpia, like his father. But whatever his father had been, he would never be the same.

Alex tensed, about to throw himself at her, wondering if Nile would cut him down before the guards' bullets did.

And then one of the windows shattered and something exploded inside the church. Thick smoke billowed out, spreading across the black and white tiles, devouring everything. At the same time came the chatter of machine-gun fire and a second explosion, this one outside. Julia Rothman staggered and fell sideways. Nile twisted round, the white blotches on his face suddenly more livid than ever, his eyes wide and staring. Alex moved.

He lashed out at the guard on his left, swinging his elbow into the man's stomach and feeling the bone sink into soft flesh. The man doubled up. The other guard turned and Alex pivoted on one foot, kicking hard with the other. His heel smashed into the barrel of the man's machine gun a fraction before it fired. Alex felt the bullets pass over his shoulder and heard a scream as one of the other guards was hit. Well, that made one less anyway!

He charged, head down, and slammed into the man like a maddened bull. The guard cried out. Alex punched upwards, his fist driving into the man's throat. The guard was thrown off his feet and sent crashing to the floor.

Alex was free.

Everything was confused. Smoke coiled and twisted. More machine-gun fire, another explosion. Alex saw the balloon rise slowly above the church. It hadn't been hit; it had passed through the gaping roof and was continuing its journey up into the London sky. Suddenly he knew that whatever happened down here, that was where he had to be. The balloon carried equipment that was set to automatic. MI6 were here. They might invade the church and capture Julia Rothman; they might bring the balloon back down. But there could only be minutes left. It might already be too late.

There was only one thing Alex could do. The balloon was trailing the two ropes that would act as anchors when the platform reached the correct height. Alex sprinted towards them. A man blocked his way and Alex automatically dropped him with a roundhouse kick. He grabbed the nearest

rope and felt a jerk as the balloon lifted him off the ground.

“Stop him!” Mrs Rothman screamed.

She had seen him but the smoke was still cloaking him from the other guards. There was a burst of machine-gun fire but it missed, slicing the rope a few metres below his feet. Alex looked down and saw that the ground was already quite a long way away. And then he was pulled out of the church, up into the open air, leaving Nile, Mrs Rothman and the swirling chaos behind.

Half blinded by the smoke and shocked by the suddenness of the attack, Mrs Rothman had to waste precious seconds forcing herself to calm down. She strode over to the television monitors, trying to make sense of the situation. She could see soldiers in black combat dress, their faces covered by helmets, taking up positions outside the church. Well, she could deal with them in her own time. Right now, the boy was all that mattered.

“Nile!” she snapped. “Get after him!”

Nile had been hit by flying fragments of glass from the first explosion. For once he seemed slow to react, confused.

“Now!” she screamed.

Nile moved. One rope still hung down, shivering in front of him. He grabbed hold of it and, like Alex, was jerked into the air.

The platform was now forty metres above ground level. It had another sixty metres to travel before the dishes would activate. The extra weight—Alex on one rope, Nile on the other—had slowed it down. But the burner was still heating the air inside the envelope. A digital display on one of the metal boxes was flickering and changing, measuring the distance. Forty-one ... forty-two... The machines knew nothing of what was taking place below. That didn't matter. They would do what they had been designed for. The dishes were waiting for the signal to start transmitting.

The balloon continued to rise. There were just four minutes left.

Mrs Jones had acted immediately. There had been five SAS teams on permanent standby in different parts of London, and as soon as Alex's signal had been received, she had alerted the team nearest to him, with the other four moving in as back-up.

Eight men were slowly closing in on the church—all of them dressed in full combat gear, including flameproof black overalls, belt kits, body armour, Kevlar vests and Mk 6 combat helmets complete with throat mikes. They were carrying a variety of weapons. Most of them had a Sig 9mm pistol strapped to their thigh. One had a sawn-off pump-action shotgun which would be used to blast open the church doors. Others carried axes, knives, Maglites and flashbang grenades; and each man was equipped with the same high-powered semiautomatic sub-machine gun, the Heckler & Koch 9mm MP5, the favourite assault weapon of the SAS. As they spread out across the seemingly empty street, they barely looked human. They could have been radio-controlled robots, sent from some future war.

They knew that the church was their target but this operation was every soldier's nightmare. Normally, when the SAS go in, they will have been briefed by the police and regular army. They will have access to a huge computer database giving them vital information about the building they're about to attack: the thickness of its walls, the position of windows and doors. If no information is available, they can still produce a three-dimensional computer image by simply inputting whatever details they can see outside. But this time there was nothing. The Church of Forgotten Saints was a blank. And there were only minutes left.

Their instructions were clear. Find Alex Rider and get him out. Find the dishes and destroy them. But even after everything that had happened, Alan Blunt had made sure they understood their priorities. The dishes mattered more.

The soldiers had arrived just in time to see the dome open and the balloon start to appear above the church.

They were too late. If they had come equipped with Stingers—heat-seeking missiles—they could have brought it down. But this was the middle of London. They were prepared for what was essentially a hostage situation.

They hadn't counted on a full-out war.

The balloon rose in front of their eyes and they were unable to stop it. They could see at once that they needed to get onto the roof of the oratory, but first they had to reach it. One of the men made a snap decision and shot a 94mm HEAT warhead rocket from a plastic firing tube. The missile looped towards the balloon but fell short, smashing through an upper window and detonating inside the church. This was the explosion that had given Alex his chance.

It was the signal for the Scorpia men to show themselves. Suddenly the SAS team found themselves under fire from both sides as a blazing torrent of bullets erupted from the abandoned shops. Somebody threw a grenade. A huge ball of flame and shattered concrete ripped through the air. One of the men was sent flying, his arms and legs limp. He crashed to the ground and lay still.

The SAS hadn't been expecting a war, but in seconds they found themselves in the middle of one. They were outnumbered. The church was seemingly impregnable. The balloon was still rising.

One of the soldiers had dropped to his knee and was talking furiously into his radio transmitter.

“This is Delta One Three. We have engaged the enemy and are coming under heavy fire. We need immediate back-up. Urgent. Satellite dishes have been located. Request immediate air strike to take them out fast. They are being carried by hot-air balloon over the target area. Repeat, they are in a balloon. We cannot reach them. An air strike must respond ... condition red. Over.”

The message was relayed instantly to Headquarters Strike Command at RAF High Wycombe, thirty miles outside London. It took them a few precious seconds to understand what they were being told, and a few more precious seconds to believe it. But in less than a minute, two Tornado GR4 fighter jets were taxiing towards the main runway. Each plane was equipped with Paveway II general-purpose bombs with built-in laser guidance systems and movable tail fins. The pilots were fully trained in low altitude precision attacks. Flying at just over seven hundred miles per

hour, they would reach the church in less than five minutes. They would blast the balloon out of the sky.

That was the plan.

Unfortunately, they didn't have five minutes. This was the first real test for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force that had been created to tackle any major terrorist alert. But everything had happened too quickly. Scorpia had left it to the very last moment before revealing their hand.

By the time the planes got there, it would be too late.

Alex Rider pulled himself up the rope, one hand over the other, keeping a loop between his feet. He had done the same often enough in the school gym, but—he had no need to remind himself—this wasn't quite the same.

For a start, even when he stopped to rest, he still went up. The balloon was rising steadily. The hot air inside the envelope weighed twenty-one grams per cubic foot. The cooler air of the London sky weighed roughly twenty-eight grams per cubic foot. This was the simple arithmetic that made the balloon fly. And that was exactly what Alex was doing. If he had looked down, he would have seen the ground fifty metres below. He didn't look down. That was something else that was different from a school gym. If he fell from this height, he would die.

But the platform was less than ten metres above him. He could see the great rectangle, blocking out the sky.

Above it the burner was still blazing, shooting a tongue of flame into the bulging blue and white envelope.

Alex's shoulders and arms were aching. Worse than that, every movement sent pain shuddering through his bones. His wrists felt as if they were being torn apart. He heard another explosion and a sustained burst of machine-gun fire. He wondered if the SAS were shooting at him. If they had seen the balloon—and they must have—they would want to bring it down, no matter what the cost. What did his own life matter compared with the thousands who would die if the dishes reached one hundred metres?

The thought gave him new strength. If a stray bullet caught him while he was dangling from the rope, he would fall. For more than one reason he needed to be on that platform. He gritted his teeth and pulled himself up.

Sixty-five metres, sixty-six... The balloon was unstoppable. But the distance between Alex and his goal was shortening. There was a third explosion and he risked a glance down. Almost at once he wished he hadn't. The ground was a long way below. The SAS men were the size of toy soldiers. He could see them taking up their positions in the street that led to the church, preparing to storm the front entrance. Scorpia's men were in the derelict shops on either side. The explosion that Alex had just heard must have come from a hand grenade.

But the battle meant nothing to him. He had seen something else that filled him with dread. A man was climbing the other rope and there could be no mistaking the white blotches on his face. It was Nile. He was moving slowly, as if out of breath. Alex was surprised by that. He knew how fit and strong Nile was. He could almost see the muscles rippling beneath the man's shirt as he reached up with one hand. He had to disable the dishes—permanently—before Nile arrived. After that, he wouldn't stand a chance.

Something struck his hand and he cried out. Alex had still been climbing, even with his eyes fixed on Nile—

and he hadn't seen that he had at last reached the platform. He had hit his knuckles against the edge of one of the dishes. For a moment he wondered if he could reach out and pull the bloody thing off. Let it fall and smash somewhere below. But he could see at once that the dishes were well secured with metal braces. He would have to find another way.

And first, that meant climbing onto the platform itself. This wasn't going to be easy—and yet he had to move quickly, giving himself as much time as possible before Nile caught up with him.

He leant backwards and let go of the rope with one hand. His stomach lurched and he thought he was going to fall. But then he lunged and grabbed hold of the edge of the railing that ran all the way around the platform.

With a last effort, he heaved himself up and over, toppling down the other side. He landed awkwardly, banging his knee on the edge of a propane gas cylinder. He let the pain ripple through him as he tried to work out what to do.

He examined the balloon.

There were two propane tanks feeding the burner less than a metre above his head. Thick black tubes made of rubber or plastic connected them, and Alex wondered if he could unfasten them and make the flame go out.

Would the balloon sink? Or would there be enough hot air in the envelope to keep it rising?

He examined the metal boxes that sat, like a complicated stereo system, in the centre of the platform. One box obviously controlled each dish. There was a tangled network of cables joining them all together. Each box had a single, blinking light—currently yellow. The power was on. The dishes were primed. But the terahertz beams hadn't yet been activated. The fifth box was some sort of master control. It had a window set into the surface, a digital read-out. Seventy-seven ... seventy-eight... seventy-nine... Alex watched as the altitude was measured and the balloon moved ever nearer to the point of detonation.

And suddenly he had the answer. Disconnect the dishes. Do it before the platform reached one hundred metres.

Do it before Nile arrived. How much time did he have? Very briefly he considered somehow unfastening the rope that Nile was climbing. But even if it was possible, he would never be able to bring himself to do it, to kill someone in such a cold-blooded way. Anyway, it would take too long. No. The four twinkling lights were his targets. Somehow he had to turn them off.

He got unsteadily to his feet and took a small step, the platform swaying slightly beneath him. For a moment he was afraid. Was the platform even designed to hold his weight? Move too fast and it might tip up and throw him off. He grimaced and edged forward. Apart from the hiss of the gas feeding the flame, the hot-air balloon was absolutely silent. Somewhere inside him, Alex wished he could simply sit back and enjoy the ride. The

majestic envelope, soaring into the sky. The views of London. But he had perhaps less than a minute before Nile got there. And how long until the balloon reached the right height?

Eighty-three ... eighty-four...

God. It was like being back in Murmansk again. Another digital counter, though that one had been going down, not up, and it had been attached to a nuclear bomb. Why him? Alex fell to his knees and reached out for the first of the cables.

He quickly examined it. It was thick, attached to the master control by a solid-looking socket. He tried unscrewing it but it didn't budge. He would have to tear it out, and in such a way that it would be impossible to reconnect. His hand closed around the cable and he pulled with all his might. Nothing happened. The connections were too strong: metal screwed into metal. And the cables themselves were too thick. He needed a knife or a pair of scissors; he had nothing.

Alex leant back and pressed his foot against the metal box. He strained, still gripping the cable, using his whole body weight. The balloon was still rising. A wisp of cloud slid past—or maybe it was smoke from the fight below. Alex swore through gritted teeth, his entire consciousness focused on the cable and its connection.

And suddenly it came free. Alex felt the cable tear. He fell back, his head slamming into the platform railing.

Ignoring the new pain, he dragged himself back up. He could see the separate ends—the severed wires—

sprouting out of his hands. There were deep welts in his palms, and he had hurt his head. But when he looked, he saw that one of the yellow lights had blinked out. One of the dishes was no longer functioning.

Ninety-three ... ninety-four...

There were three left. And Alex knew he didn't have enough time to disconnect them all.

Even so, he lunged forward and grabbed hold of the second. What else could he do? Once again he pressed the flats of his feet against the side of the box. He took a deep breath...

...and something flashed in the corner of his eye. Instinctively Alex threw himself sideways. The samurai sword, half a metre long, sliced the air so close to his face that he felt it. He realized that it had been aimed at his throat. But for the sun reflecting off the blade, he would have been killed.

Nile had reached the platform. He was standing in the corner, holding the railing. There had been two swords strapped to his back—he had thrown only one of them. Now he reached for the other. Alex was lying flat. He couldn't move. There wasn't enough room to do anything. He was an easy target, wedged between the metal boxes and the side of the platform. Above him the flame burned, carrying the balloon the last few metres.

Ninety-seven ... ninety-eight... ninety-nine...

The digital display flickered to the final figure. There was a buzzing sound inside the master control and the lights on the three remaining connected boxes changed from yellow to red. The system had been activated.

Terahertz signals were being beamed all over London.

Alex knew that inside him, in his very heart, the golden nanoshells had begun to break up.

Nile unsheathed the second sword.

Inside the church Mrs Rothman was beginning to realize that the battle was lost. Her men had fought well and they outnumbered the enemy—but they were simply outclassed. There had been many casualties and two more SAS units had arrived, providing back-up for the first.

She could see the fighting outside. Everything was being relayed to her by a series of hidden cameras. It was right in front of her on the television monitors, one for every angle. The street had been torn apart. A wounded SAS man was being dragged away by two of his comrades, dust and debris leaping up as the surface was strafed by enemy fire. More soldiers were moving from doorway to doorway, lobbing grenades through the windows behind them. This was the sort of fighting the SAS had experienced in Northern Ireland and the Middle East.

The whole area had been cordoned off. Police cars had moved in from every direction. They couldn't be seen but their sirens filled the air. This was London. It was nearing the end of a working day. It was impossible to believe that something like this could really be happening here.

There was another explosion—closer this time. Thick smoke billowed over the open dome and paintwork rained down, flaking off the walls. Most of the Scorpio men had abandoned their positions, preferring to take their chances outside. A guard ran up to Mrs Rothman, blood streaking his face.

"They're inside the church," he rasped. "We're finished. I'm leaving."

"You'll stay at your post!" Mrs Rothman snapped.

"To hell with that." The guard spat and swore. "Everyone's going. We're all getting out of here."

Mrs Rothman looked nervous, afraid of being left on her own. "Please, let me have your gun," she begged.

"Sure. Why not?" The guard handed his weapon to her.

"Thank you," she said, and shot him with a single, short burst.

She watched the man go sprawling, then went over to the monitors. The SAS were in the outer chamber. She could see them laying plastic explosives against the fake brick wall. It was hard to be sure, but she fancied they would need rather more explosive than they were using. She had designed the wall herself and it was solid steel. Even so, they would get through it eventually. They would not relent.

She glanced up at the balloon, now straining at the one remaining rope, a hundred metres above London. She knew it had reached the correct height—the equipment inside the church had told her this. In just another minute or so it would all be over. She thought of Alex Rider somewhere up

above. All in all, it had been a mistake bringing him here. Why had she? To see him die, of course. She hadn't been there when John Rider had died and she wanted to make up for it. Miss the father; catch the son. That was why she had risked everything to bring Alex to the church, and she knew the other members of the executive board of Scorpia would be less than pleased. But it didn't matter. The operation would succeed. The SAS were too late.

A huge explosion. The whole church shook. Three of the largest organ pipes keeled over and came crashing down. Brick and plaster fragments hung in the air. Half the television monitors went black. But the steel wall held. She had been right about that.

She threw the machine gun down and hurried to a door almost invisible in the wall of a side chapel. It was lucky that Mrs Rothman was the sort of person who prepared for every eventuality—including the need to slip out without being seen.

The guard she had killed had been right. It was definitely time to go.

Alex lay on his back, his shoulders pressing against the railing of the platform. The first sword that Nile had thrown had sliced into the plastic floor, centimetres from his head, and it was still there, quivering, just beside his neck. Nile had unsheathed the second sword and was balancing it in his hand. He was taking his time. Alex knew that he had no need to hurry. He had nowhere to hide. They were less than three metres apart. Alex had seen what Nile could do. There was no way he would miss.

And yet...

Why was he so slow? Taking his time with the sword, still clutching the railing with his other hand...

Alex looked at him, examining the handsome, flawed face, searching for something in the man's eyes.

And found it.

That look. He had seen it before. He remembered Wolf, the SAS soldier he had trained with. And suddenly everything made sense. The secret weakness that Mrs Rothman had mentioned. The reason why Nile had come second, not first, at Malagosto. He thought back to their meeting in the bell tower over the monastery. Nile had lingered at the door, unwilling to come forward, holding onto the frame in just the same way that he was holding onto the railing now. No wonder Nile had been so slow climbing up to the balloon.

Nile was afraid of heights.

But that wasn't going to save Alex. Fifteen seconds had passed since the lights had turned red. Already the nanoshells with their poisonous cargo would be oscillating inside his heart. All over London children would be walking home, waiting for buses, pouring into tube stations, unaware of what was about to happen.

Then Nile spoke.

"This is what I promised would happen to you if you betrayed us," he said. The smile on his face might have been forced, but there could be no doubting what he was about to do. He balanced the sword in the palm of his hand, feeling the weight before he aimed and threw. "I said I would kill you. And that's what I'm going to do, right now."

"Sure, Nile," Alex replied. "But how are you going to get back down?"

"What?" The smile faltered.

"Just look down, Nile," Alex went on. "Look how high we are." He glanced up at the flame and the envelope.

"You know, I don't think this balloon is going to hold us both up."

"Shut up!" Nile hissed the words. The hand clutching the railing had gone whiter than ever. Alex could see the fingers clenching tighter and tighter.

"Look at the people; look at the cars. See how tiny they are!"

"Stop it!"

And that was when Alex made his move. He already knew what he was going to do. Nile was petrified, unable to react. All his speed and strength had vanished. With a gasp, Alex pulled out the first sword, freeing it from the plastic. In a single movement he swept it up and slashed through one of the rubber pipes that fed the burner.

After that, everything happened very quickly.

The severed pipe coiled left and right like a wounded snake. Propane gas in liquid form was still being pumped through, and as the severed end whipped past the burner, it ignited, becoming at once a huge ball of flame. The pipe twisted back again and spat its deadly payload in the direction of Nile.

Nile had just managed to raise the second sword in the start of what would be his final throw. He was aiming at Alex's chest. Then the fireball hit him. He screamed once and disappeared. One second he was there, the next he had been blown into the air, a spinning, burning puppet of a man, falling to his death one hundred metres below.

It looked as if Alex was about to follow him.

The entire platform was on fire, the plastic melting. There was burning liquid propane everywhere and it was dissolving everything it touched. Alex struggled to his feet as the flames licked towards him. What now? The burner had gone out but the balloon didn't seem to be falling. The platform, however, would—and very soon.

The four ropes securing it to the envelope were made of nylon and all four of them were on fire. One of them snapped and Alex cried out as the platform tilted, almost throwing him over the edge. His eyes darted to the machinery. The electric cables must be fireproof. The little red lights showed him that the three remaining dishes were still transmitting. More than a minute must have passed since Nile had appeared, surely! Alex

pressed a hand against his chest, expecting at any moment to feel the stab of pain as the poison broke free and entered his system.

But he was still alive, and he knew he had just seconds left to escape from the burning platform. No chance of jumping to safety. He was a hundred metres above the ground. He heard a snapping sound as a second rope began to break. The fire was out of control. It was burning him; it was burning everything.

Alex jumped.

Not down—but up. He leapt first onto the control box and then up so that his hands caught the metal frame surrounding the burner. He hauled himself up and stood. Now he could reach the circular skirt at the bottom of the envelope itself. It was incredible. Looking up, it felt as if he were standing inside a huge, circular room. The walls were fabric but they could have been solid. He was inside the balloon, imprisoned by it. He saw a nylon cord. It led all the way to the parachute valve at the very top. Would it take his weight?

And then the remaining ropes holding the platform gave way. The platform fell, taking the burner and the dishes with it, disappearing from under Alex's feet. Alex just had time to wind the nylon cord around one hand and grab hold of the fabric of the balloon with the other. Suddenly he was dangling. Once again his arms and wrists took the strain. He wondered if the balloon would crumple and fall. But most of the weight had gone; only he was left. It stayed where it was.

Alex looked down. He couldn't stop himself. And that was when he saw—in the middle of the fire and the smoke, the spinning platform and the falling ropes—the three red lights had gone out. He was sure of it. Either the flames had destroyed the machinery or the dishes had deactivated themselves the moment they dropped below one hundred metres.

The terahertz beams had stopped. Not a single child would die.

Nobody was sure where the bag lady had appeared from. Perhaps she had been dossing in the small cemetery behind the Church of Forgotten Saints. But now she had wandered into what, until a few minutes ago, had been a full-scale battle.

She was lucky. The SAS men had taken control of the church and the immediate area. Most of the Scorpia people were dead; the remainder had put down their weapons in surrender. A final explosion had breached the entrance of the church itself. SAS soldiers were already pouring in, searching for Alex.

The bag lady was clearly confused by all this activity; possibly she was also drunk. There was a bottle of cider in one of her hands and she stopped to force the neck between her rotten teeth and drink. She had a repulsive, withered face and grey hair that was long and knotted. She was dressed in a filthy coat, tied around her bulging waist with string. Her other hand clutched two dustbin bags close to her, as if they contained all the treasure in the world.

One of the soldiers saw her. "Get out of here!" he yelled. "You're in danger."

"All right, love!" The bag lady giggled. "What's the matter, then? It's like bleeding World War Three."

But she shuffled off, out of harm's way, while the SAS men rushed past her, heading for the church.

Underneath the wig, the make-up and the costume, Mrs Rothman smiled to herself. It was almost incredible that these stupid SAS soldiers should let her walk away, slipping between them in plain daylight. She had a gun hidden under her coat and she would use it if anyone tried to stop her. But they were so busy rushing into the church, they had barely noticed her.

And then one of them called out.

"Stop!"

She had been seen after all. Mrs Rothman hurried on.

But the soldier hadn't been trying to detain her: he had been trying to warn her. A shadow fell across her face and she looked up just in time to see a blazing rectangle fall out of the sky. Julia Rothman opened her mouth to scream but the sound didn't have time to reach her Lips. She was crushed, driven into the pavement, flattened like a creature in some hideous cartoon. The SAS man who had shouted could only gaze at the burning wreckage in horror. Then, slowly, he looked up to see where it had come from.

But there was nothing there. The sky was clear.

Freed from the platform and the mooring ropes, the balloon had been blown north, with Alex still clinging beneath it. He was limp and exhausted; his legs and the side of his chest had been burnt. It was as much as he could do simply to hang on.

But the air inside the envelope had cooled and the balloon was coming down. Alex had been lucky that the fabric of the balloon was flame-resistant.

Of course, he might still be killed. He had no control of the balloon at all and the wind might choose to steer him into a high voltage wire. He had already crossed the river and could see Trafalgar Square with Nelson's Column looming up in front of him. It would be a sick joke to land there and end up getting run over.

Alex could only hang on and wait to find out what was going to happen. Despite the pain in his arms, he was aware of a sense of inner peace. Somehow, against all the odds, he had come through everything alive. Nile was dead. Mrs Rothman was probably a prisoner. The nanoshells were no longer a threat.

And what about him? The wind had changed. It was carrying him to the west. Yes. There was Green Park—just fifty-odd metres below. He could see people pointing up at him and shouting. He silently urged the balloon on.

With a bit of luck he might make it all the way to Chelsea, to his house, where Jack Starbright would be waiting. How much further could it be? Did the balloon have the strength to take him there?

He hoped so, because that was all he cared about now.

He just wanted to go home.

Chapter 19: DEEP COVER

It ended—inevitably, it seemed to Alex—in Alan Blunt’s office in Liverpool Street.

They had left him alone for a week but then the telephone call had come on Friday evening, asking him to come in. Asking, not telling. That was at least a change. And they had chosen a Saturday, so he wouldn’t have to miss school.

The balloon had dropped him on the edge of Hyde Park, lowering him to the grass as gently as an autumn leaf.

It was the end of the day and by that time there were few people in the park. Alex had been able to slip away quietly, five minutes before a dozen police cars had come roaring in. It was a twenty-minute walk home and he had more or less fallen into Jack’s arms before taking a hot bath, wolfing down dinner and going to bed.

He wasn’t badly hurt. There were burns on his arms and chest and his wrist was swollen where he had dangled from the balloon. Mrs Rothman had also left her mark on his cheek. Looking at himself in the mirror, he wondered how he was going to explain the very obvious-shaped bruise. In the end he told everyone he had been mugged. In a way, he felt, he had.

He had been back at Brookland for five days. Mr Grey was one of the first people to see him crossing the school yard before assembly, and he shook his head warily but said nothing. The teacher had taken it as a personal insult that Alex had disappeared on his school trip to Venice, and although Alex felt terrible, he couldn’t tell him the truth. On the other hand, Tom Harris was overjoyed.

“I knew you’d be OK,” he said. “You sounded a bit down when I spoke to you on the phone. That was after that place had blown up. But at least you were still alive. And a couple of days later, Jerry got this humongous cheque for a new parachute. Except it was about five times too much. He’s in New Zealand now, thanks to you.

BASE jumping off some building in Auckland. Just what he’s always wanted!” Tom took out a newspaper cutting. “Was this you?” he demanded.

Alex looked at it. It was a photograph of the hot-air balloon drifting over London. He could see a tiny figure clinging to it. Fortunately the picture had been taken from too far away to identify him. Nobody knew what had happened at the Church of Forgotten Saints. And nobody knew he was involved.

“Yes,” Alex admitted. “But, Tom—you mustn’t tell anyone.”

“I’ve already told Jerry.”

“No one else.”

“Yeah. I know. Official secrets and all that.” Tom frowned. “Maybe I should join MI6. I’m sure I’d make a great spy.”

Alex thought of his friend now as he sat down opposite Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones. He lowered himself slowly into the chair, wondering what they were going to say to him. Jack hadn’t wanted him to come here at all.

“The moment they know you’re capable of walking, they’ll probably have you parachuting into North Korea,”

she had said. “They’re never going to leave you alone, Alex. I don’t even want to know what happened to you after Venice. But just promise me you won’t let it happen again.”

Alex agreed with her. He would rather have stayed at home. But he knew he had to be here. If nothing else, he owed it to Mrs Jones after what had happened in her flat.

“It’s good to see you, Alex,” Blunt said. “Once again, you’ve done a very good job.”

Very good. The highest praise Blunt knew.

“I’ll just bring you up to date,” Blunt went on. “I don’t need to tell you that Scorpio’s plot was a complete failure, and I very much doubt that they’ll try anything on this scale again. They lost one of their top assassins, the man called Nile, when he fell out of the balloon. How did that happen, by the way?”

“He slipped,” Alex said shortly. He didn’t want to go over it again.

“I see. Well, you might like to know that Julia Rothman also died.”

That was news to Alex. He had assumed she must have escaped.

Mrs Jones took up the story. “The platform underneath the balloon fell on her as she was trying to escape,” she explained. “She was crushed.”

“I’d have been disappointed too,” Alex muttered.

Blunt sniffed. “The most important thing of all is that London’s children are going to be safe. As that scientist—

Dr Stephenson—explained, the nanoshells will slowly pass out of their bodies. I have to tell you, Alex, that the terahertz dishes were transmitting for at least a minute. God knows how close we came to a major disaster.”

"I'll try to move a little faster next time," Alex said.

"Yes. Well. One other thing. You might be amused to hear that Mark Kellner resigned this morning. The prime minister's director of communications—remember him? He's telling the press that he wants to spend more time with his family. The funny thing is, his family can't stand him. Nobody can. Mr Kellner made one mistake too many. Nobody could have foreseen that stunt with the hot-air balloon. But someone has to carry the can, and I'm glad to say it's going to be him."

"Well, if that's all you called me in for, I'd better get home," Alex said. "I've missed more school and I've got a lot to catch up on."

"No, Alex. I'm afraid you can't leave quite yet." Mrs Jones sounded more serious than Alex had ever heard her and he wondered if she was going to make him pay for his attempt on her life.

"I'm sorry about what I nearly did, Mrs Jones," he said. "But I think I've more or less made up for it..."

"That's not what I want to speak to you about. As far as I'm concerned, your visit to my flat never happened.

But there's something more important. You and I have never spoken about Albert Bridge."

Alex felt cold inside. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"Because I know what you did was right. I've seen Scorpia for myself now; I know what they are capable of. If my father was one of them, then you were right. He deserved to die."

The words hurt Alex even as he spoke them. They caught in his throat.

"There's somebody I want you to meet, Alex. He's come into the office today and he's standing outside. I know you don't want to spend any more time here than you have to, but will you let him talk to you? It will only take a few minutes."

"All right." Alex shrugged. He didn't know what Mrs Jones wanted to prove. He had no wish to return to the circumstances of his father's death.

The door opened and a tall man walked in, bearded, with brown curly hair that was beginning to grey. He was casually dressed in a beaten-up leather jacket and jeans. He looked in his early thirties and although Alex was sure he had never met him, his face seemed vaguely familiar.

"Alex Rider?" he asked. He had a soft, pleasant voice.

"Yes."

"How do you do?" He held out a hand. Alex stood up and felt his hand taken in a grasp that was warm and friendly. "My name is James Adair," he said. "I think you've met my father, Sir Graham Adair."

Alex was hardly likely to forget. Sir Graham Adair was the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office. He could see the similarity in the faces of the two men. But he knew James Adair from somewhere else too. Of course.

He was a lot older now. The hair colour was different and he was more thickset. But the face was the same. He had seen it on a television screen. On Albert Bridge.

"James Adair is a senior lecturer at Imperial College here in London," Mrs Jones explained. "But fourteen years ago he was a student. His father was already an extremely senior civil servant—"

"You were kidnapped," Alex interrupted. "You were the one Scorpia kidnapped."

"That's right. Look, do you mind if we sit down? I feel very formal standing up like this."

James Adair took a seat. Alex waited for him to speak. He was puzzled and a little apprehensive. This man had been there when his father was killed. In a way, it was because of this man that John Rider had died. Why had Mrs Jones brought him here now?

"I'll tell you my story and then get out of here," James Adair said. "When I was eighteen years old, I was the victim of an attempt to blackmail my father. I was snatched by an organization called Scorpia, and they were going to torture me and kill me unless my dad did exactly what they said. But Scorpia made a mistake. My father could influence government policy but he couldn't actually change it. There was nothing he could do. I was told I was going to die.

"But then, at the last minute, there was a change of plan. I met a woman called Julia Rothman. She was very beautiful but a complete bitch. I think she couldn't wait to get out the red-hot poker or whatever. Anyway, she told me that I was going to be exchanged for one of her people. He'd been captured by MI6. And they were going to swap us. On Albert Bridge.

"They drove me there very early one morning. I have to admit that I was terrified. I was certain there was going to be a double-cross. I thought they might shoot me and dump me in the Thames. But everything seemed to be very straightforward. It was just like in a spy film. There were three men and me on one side of the bridge.

They all had guns. And on the other side of the bridge I could see a figure. That was your dad. He was with some people from MI6." The lecturer glanced at Mrs Jones. "She was one of them."

"It was my first major field operation," Mrs Jones murmured.

"Go on," Alex said. He had been drawn in. He couldn't help himself.

"Well, somebody gave a signal and we both began to walk—almost as if we were going to fight a duel, except that our hands were tied. I have to tell you, Alex, the bridge felt a mile long. It seemed to take for ever to get across. But at last we met in the middle, your father and I; and I was sort of grateful to him, because it was thanks to him that I wasn't going to be killed, and yet at the same time I knew he worked for Scorpia, so I thought he must be one of the bad guys.

“And then he spoke to me.”

Alex held his breath. He remembered the video Mrs Rothman had shown him. It was true. His father and the teenager had spoken. He had been unable to hear the words and had wondered what they had said.

“He was very calm,” James Adair went on. “I hope you won’t mind me saying this, Alex, but, looking at you now, I can see him as he was then. He was totally in command. And this is what he said to me.

“There’s going to be shooting. You have to move fast.

“What? What do you mean?”

“When the shooting starts, don’t look round. Just run as fast as you can. You’ll be safe.”

There was a long silence.

“My dad knew he was going to be shot?” Alex asked.

“Yes.”

“But how?”

“Let me finish.” James Adair ran a hand across his beard. “I took about another ten steps and suddenly there was a shot. I know I wasn’t meant to look round, but I did. Just for a second. Your father had been shot in the back. There was blood on his padded jacket; I could see a gash in the material. And then I remembered what he’d told me and I began to run . . . hell for leather. I just had to get out of there.”

That was another thing Alex had noticed when he’d watched the video. James Adair had reacted with amazing speed. Anyone else would surely have frozen. But he’d clearly known what he was doing.

Because he had been warned.

By John Rider.

“I tore up the bridge,” he went on. “Then all hell broke loose. The Scorpia people opened fire. They wanted to kill me, of course. But the MI6 lot had machine guns and they fired back. All in all, it was a miracle I wasn’t hit. I managed to get to the north side of the bridge and a big car appeared out of nowhere. A door opened and I dived in. And that was just about the end of it, as far as I was concerned. I was whisked away and my father met me a couple of minutes later, hugely relieved. He’d thought he’d never see me again.”

And that made sense. When Alex had met Sir Graham Adair, the civil servant had been surprisingly friendly. He had made it clear that he was in some way in Alex’s debt.

“So my father . . . sacrificed himself for you,” Alex said. He didn’t understand. His father had worked for Scorpia. Why should he have been prepared to die for someone he had never met?

“There is one other thing I have to tell you,” the lecturer said. “It’ll probably come as a shock to you. It certainly came as a shock to me. About a month later I went down to my father’s home in Wiltshire. By then I’d been debriefed and there were a whole lot of security things I had to know about just in case Scorpia tried to have another crack at me. And”—he swallowed—“your father was there.”

“What?” Alex stared.

“I arrived early. And as I came in, your father was leaving. He’d been in a meeting with my dad.”

“But that’s . . .”

“I know. It’s impossible. But it was definitely him. He recognized me at once.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks very much.

“I’m glad I was able to help. Look after yourself.

“That was what he said to me. I remember the words exactly. Then he got in his car and drove off.”

“So my father . . .”

James Adair stood up. “I’m sure Mrs Jones can explain it all to you,” he said. “But my dad wanted me to tell you how very grateful we are to you. He asked me to pass that on to you. Your father saved my life. There’s no doubt about it. I’m married now; I have two children. Funnily enough, I named the eldest John after him. There would be no children if it hadn’t been for him. My father would have no son and no grandsons. Whatever you may think of him, whatever you’ve been told about him, John Rider was a very brave man.”

James Adair nodded at Mrs Jones and left the room. The door closed. There was a second, long silence.

“I don’t understand,” Alex said.

“Your father wasn’t an assassin,” Mrs Jones said. “He wasn’t working for Scorpia. He was working for us.”

“He was a spy?”

“A very brilliant spy,” Alan Blunt muttered. “We recruited the two brothers—Ian and John—in the same year.

Ian was a good agent. But John was the better man by far.”

“He worked for you?”

“Yes.”

“But he killed people. Mrs Rothman showed me. He was in prison...”

“Everything Julia Rothman thought she knew about your father was a lie.” Mrs Jones sighed. “It’s true that he had been in the army, that he had a distinguished career with the Parachute Regiment and that he was decorated for his part in the Falklands War. But the rest of it—the fight with the taxi driver, the prison sentence and all that—we made up. It’s called deep cover, Alex. We wanted John Rider to be recruited by Scorpia. He was the bait and they took him.”

“Why?”

“Because Scorpia was expanding all over the world. We needed to know what it was doing, the names of the people it was employing, the size and structure of its organization. John Rider was a weapons expert; he was a brilliant fighter. And Scorpia thought he was washed up. He was welcomed with open arms.”

“And all the time he was reporting to you?”

“His information saved more lives than you can imagine.”

“But that’s not true!” Alex’s head swam. “Mrs Rothman told me that he killed five or six people. And Yassen Gregorovich worshipped him! He showed me the scar. He said my dad saved his life.”

“Your father was pretending to be a dangerous killer,” Mrs Jones said. “And so—yes, Alex—he had to kill. One of his victims was a drug dealer in the Amazon jungle. That was when he saved Yassen’s life. Another was an American double agent; a third was a corrupt policeman. I’m not saying that these people deserved to die. But certainly the world was able to get along very well without them and I’m afraid your father had no choice.”

“What about the others you told me about?” Alex had to know.

“There were two more,” Blunt cut in. “One was a priest, working on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. The other was a woman in Sydney. They were more difficult. We couldn’t let them die. And so we faked their deaths ... in much the same way that we faked your father’s.”

“Albert Bridge...”

“It was faked.” Mrs Jones took up the narrative again. “Your father had told us as much as we needed to know about Scorpia and we had to get him out. There were two reasons for this. The first was that your mother had just given birth to a baby boy. That was you, Alex. Your father wanted to come home; he wanted to be with you and your mother. But also it was becoming too dangerous. You see, Mrs Rothman had fallen in love with him.”

It was almost too much to take on board at once. But Alex remembered Julia Rothman talking to him in the hotel in Positano.

I was very attracted to him. He was an extremely good-looking man.

Alex tried to grasp at the truth through the swirling quicksand of lies and counter-lies. “She told me he was captured. In Malta...”

“That was faked too,” Mrs Jones revealed. “John Rider couldn’t just walk out of Scorpia; they’d never have let him. So we had to arrange things for him. And that’s what we did. He had been sent to Malta, supposedly to kill his sixth victim. He tipped us off and we were waiting for him. We staged a ferocious gun battle. You know what we’re capable of, Alex. We did more or less the same thing for you with that multiple pile-up on the Westway. Yassen was there, in Malta, but we let him escape. We needed him to tell Julia Rothman what had happened. Then we ‘captured’ John Rider. As far as Scorpia were concerned, he would be interrogated and then either thrown back into prison or executed. They would never see him again.”

“So why...?” Alex still couldn’t make complete sense of it. “Why Albert Bridge?”

“Albert Bridge was a bloody mess,” Alan Blunt said. It was the first time Alex had ever heard him swear.

“You’ve met Sir Graham Adair. He’s a very powerful man. He also happens to be an old friend of mine. And when Scorpia took his son, I didn’t think there would be anything I could do.”

“It was your father’s idea,” Mrs Jones went on. “He also knew Sir Graham. He wanted to help. You have to understand, Alex, that’s the sort of man he was. One day I want to tell you all about him—not just this. He believed passionately in what he was doing. Serving his country. I know that sounds naïve and old-fashioned.

But he was a soldier through and through. And he believed in good and evil. I don’t know how else to put it. He wanted to make the world a better place.”

She took a deep breath.

“Your father suggested that we send him back to Scorpia as an exchange. He knew how Mrs Rothman felt about him; he knew she would agree to anything to get him back. But at the same time, he planned to double-cross her. There was a gunman in place, but the gun was loaded with blanks. John had a squib in the back of his jacket—a little firework—and a phial of blood. When the shot was fired, he activated it himself. It blew a little hole in the back of his jacket. He went sprawling and pretended to be dead. It looked as if MI6 had killed him in cold blood. But we never hurt him, Alex. That’s why I wanted you to meet James Adair. The idea was that now he would be safe again and he could simply disappear.”

Alex buried his head in his hands. There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask. His mother, his father, Julia Rothman, the bridge... He was shaking and he had to force himself back under control. At last he was ready.

“I have just two questions,” he said.

“Go on, Alex. We’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“What was my mother’s part in all this? Did she know what he was?”

“Of course she knew he was a spy. He would never have lied to her. They were very close, Alex. I never met her, I’m afraid. We don’t tend to socialize much in this business. She was a nurse before she married him. Did you know that?”

Ian Rider had told Alex that his mother had been a nurse, but he didn’t want to talk about that now. He was simply building himself up, finding the strength to ask the worst question of all.

“So how did my father die?” he asked. “And my mother? Is she still alive? What happened to her?”

Mrs Jones glanced at Alan Blunt and it was he who answered.

“After the affair on Albert Bridge, it was decided that it would be best if your father took a long holiday,” he said. “Your mother went with him. We arranged for a private plane to take them to the South of France. You were meant to go with them, Alex, but at the last minute you developed an ear infection and they had to leave you behind with a nanny. The two of you were going to follow them out when you were better.”

He paused. His eyes, as ever, showed nothing. But there was a little pain in his voice.

“Somehow Julia Rothman discovered that she had been tricked. We don’t know how; we’ll never know. But Scorpia’s a powerful organization: that much should be obvious to you by now. She found out that your father was still alive and that he was flying to France, and arranged for a bomb to be placed in the luggage hold. Your parents died together, Alex. I suppose that’s something of a mercy. And it was all so quick. They wouldn’t have had any idea...”

A plane accident.

That was what Alex had been told all his life.

Another lie.

Alex stood up. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling. On the one hand he was grateful. His father hadn’t been an evil man. He had been the exact opposite. Everything Julia Rothman had told him and everything he had thought about himself had been wrong. But at the same time, there was an overwhelming sadness, as if he was mourning his parents for the very first time.

“Alex, we’ll get a driver to take you home,” Mrs Jones said. “And we can talk more whenever you’re ready.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Alex cried, and his voice cracked. “That’s what I don’t understand. I nearly killed you, but you didn’t tell me the truth! You sent me back to Scorpia—just like my dad—but you never told me that it was Julia Rothman who killed him. Why not?”

Mrs Jones had also got to her feet. “We needed your help to find the dishes. There was no question about it.

Everything depended on you. But I didn’t want to manipulate you. I know you think that’s what we always do, but if I’d told you the truth about Julia Rothman and then given you a homing device and sent you in after her, I’d have been using you in the worst possible way. You went in there, Alex, for exactly the same reason that your father went to Albert Bridge, and I wanted you to have that choice. That’s what makes you such a great spy. It isn’t that you were made one or trained to be one. It’s just that in your heart you are one. I suppose it runs in the family.”

“But I had a gun! I was in your flat...”

“I was never in any danger. Quite apart from the glass, you couldn’t even bring yourself to aim at me, Alex. I knew you couldn’t. There was no need to tell you then. And I didn’t want to. The way Mrs Rothman had deceived you was so horrible.” She shrugged. “I wanted to give you the chance to work things out for yourself.”

For a long moment nobody said anything.

Alex turned away. “I need to be on my own,” he mumbled.

“Of course.” Mrs Jones went over to him and touched him lightly on the arm. It was the arm that was the least burnt. “Come back when you’re ready, Alex.”

“Yes—I will.”

Alex moved to the door. He opened it but then seemed to have second thoughts. “Can I ask one final question, Mrs Jones?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“It’s just something I’ve always wondered and I might as well ask you now.” He paused. “What’s your first name?”

Mrs Jones stiffened. Sitting behind his desk, Alan Blunt looked up. Then she relaxed. “It’s Tulip,” she told him.

“My parents were keen gardeners.”

Alex nodded. It made sense. He wouldn’t have used that name either.

He walked out, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 20: A MOTHER'S TOUCH

Scorpius never forgot.

Scorpius never forgave.

The sniper had been paid to take revenge and that was what he would do. His own life would be forfeit if he failed.

He knew that in a few minutes, a fourteen-year-old boy would walk out of the building which pretended to be an international bank but was really nothing of the sort. Did it matter to him that his target was a child? He had persuaded himself that it didn't. It was a terrible thing to kill a human being. But was it so much worse to kill a twenty-seven-year-old man who would never be twenty-eight than a fourteen-year-old boy who would never be fifteen? The sniper had decided that death was death. That didn't change. Nor did the fifty thousand pounds he would be paid for this hit.

As usual he would aim for the heart. The target area would be a fraction smaller this time but he would not miss. He never missed. It was time to prepare himself, to bring his breathing under control, to enter that state of calm before the kill.

He focused his attention on the gun that he was holding, the self-loading Ruger .22 model K10/22-T. It was a low velocity weapon, less deadly than some he might have chosen. But the gun had two huge advantages. It was light. And it was very compact. By removing just two screws he had been able to separate the barrel and the trigger mechanism from the stock. The stock itself folded in two. He had been able to carry the whole thing across London in an ordinary sports bag without drawing attention to himself. In his line of work, that was the critical thing.

He squared his eye against the Leupold 14x50mm Side Focus scope, adjusting the cross hairs against the door through which the boy would pass. He loved the feel of the gun in his hands, the snug fit, the perfect balance.

He had had it customized to suit his needs. The stock was laminated wood with water-resistant adhesive, making it stronger and less likely to warp. The trigger mechanism had been taken apart and polished for a smoother release. The rifle would reload itself as fast as he could fire it—but he would only need a single shot.

The sniper was content. When he fired, for the blink of an eye, as the bullet began its journey down the barrel, travelling at three hundred and thirty-one metres per second, he and the rifle would be one. The target didn't matter. Even the payment was almost irrelevant. The act of killing was enough in itself. It was better than anything in the world. In that moment, the sniper was God.

He waited. He was lying on his stomach on the roof of an office block on the other side of the road. He was a little surprised that he had been able to get access. He knew that the building opposite him housed the Special Operations division of MI6 and he had supposed that they would keep a careful watch on all the other offices around. On the other hand, he had picked two locks and dismantled a complicated security system to get here. It hadn't been easy.

The door opened and the target appeared. If he had wanted to, the sniper could have seen a handsome fourteen-year-old boy with fair hair, one strand hanging down over his eyes. A boy wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt and baggy jeans, and a wooden bead necklace (he could see every bead through the scope). Brown eyes and a slightly hard, narrow mouth. The sort of face that would have attracted plenty of girls if the boy had only lived a little longer.

The boy had a name: Alex Rider. But the sniper didn't think of that. He didn't even think of Alex as a boy. He was a heart, a pair of lungs, a convoluted system of veins and arteries. But very soon he would be nothing at all.

That was why the sniper was here. To perform a little act of surgery—not with a scalpel but a bullet.

He licked his lips and focused all his attention on his target. He wasn't holding the gun. The gun was part of him. His finger curled against the trigger. He relaxed, enjoying the moment, preparing to fire.

Alex Rider stepped out onto the street. It was about five o'clock and there were quite a few people around. He was thinking about all the things he had been told in Alan Blunt's office. They still wouldn't quite register. It was just too much to take in. His father hadn't been an assassin; he had been a spy, working for MI6. John Rider and Ian Rider. Both spies. And now Alex Rider. At last they were a family.

And yet...

Mrs Jones had told him that she wanted him to make a choice, but he wasn't sure that the choice had ever been his. Yes, he had chosen not to belong to Scorpius. But that didn't mean he had to be a lifelong member of MI6.

Alan Blunt would want to use him again: that much was certain. But maybe he would find the strength to refuse. Maybe knowing the truth at last would be enough.

All sorts of confusing thoughts were racing through his mind. But he had already made one decision. He wanted to be with Jack. He wanted to forget his homework and go out for a film and a blow-out dinner. Nothing healthy. He had said he would be home by six, but perhaps he would call and meet her at the multiplex on the Fulham Road. It was Saturday. He deserved a night out.

He took a step and stopped. Something had hit him in the chest. It was as if he had been punched. He looked left and right but there was nobody close to him. How very strange.

And here was something else. Liverpool Street seemed to be running uphill. He knew it was flat, but now it was definitely slanting. Even the buildings were leaning to one side. He didn't understand what was happening. The colour was rapidly draining out of the air. As he looked, the world went from colour to black and white, apart from a few splashes here and there: the bright yellow of a café sign, the blue of a car...

...and the red of blood. He looked down and was surprised to see that his whole front was turning crimson.

There was an irregular shape spreading rapidly across his sweatshirt. At the same time, he became aware that the sound of the traffic had faded. It was as if something had pulled him out of the world and he was only seeing it from a very long way away. A few pedestrians had stopped and turned to look at him. They were shocked. There was a woman screaming. But she was making no sound at all.

Then the street played a trick on him, tilting so suddenly that it seemed to turn upside down. A crowd had gathered. It was closing in on him and Alex wished it would go away. There must have been thirty or forty people, pointing and gesticulating. Why were they so interested in him? And why couldn't he move any more?

He opened his mouth to ask for help but no words, not even a breath, came out.

Alex was starting to feel scared. There was no pain at all, but something told him that he must have been hurt.

He was lying on the pavement, although he didn't know how he had got there. There was a red circle around him, widening with every second that passed. He tried to call for Mrs Jones. He opened his mouth again and did hear a voice calling, but it was very far away.

And then he saw two people and knew that everything was going to be all right after all. They were watching him with a mixture of sadness and understanding, as if they had always expected this to happen but were still sorry that it had. There was a little colour left in the crowd, but the two people were entirely black and white.

The man was very handsome, dressed in military uniform with close-cut hair and a solid, serious face. He looked very much like Alex, although he seemed to be in his early thirties. The woman, standing next to him, was smaller and seemed much more vulnerable. She had long, fair hair and eyes that were filled with sorrow.

He had seen photographs of this woman and he was astonished to find her here. He knew that he was looking at his mother.

He tried to get up, but he couldn't. He wanted to hold her hand, but his arms would no longer obey him. He wasn't breathing any more, but he hadn't noticed.

The man and the woman stepped forward out of the crowd. The man said nothing; he was trying to hide his emotions. But the woman leant down and reached out a hand. Only now did Alex realize that he had been looking for her all his life. She reached out and touched him, her finger finding the exact spot where there was a small hole in his shirt.

No pain. Just a sense of tiredness and resignation.

Alex Rider smiled and closed his eyes.

Saving the world one mission at a time

ALEX RIDER



ARK ANGEL



ANTHONY HOROWITZ

#1 New York Times bestselling author

Ark Angel

Alex Rider [6]

Anthony Horowitz

Puffin (2011)

General, Action Adventure, Juvenile Fiction, Fiction, Family, Espionage, Adventure stories, Political Science, Mysteries Detective Stories, Orphans, Adventure and adventurers, Law Crime, Political Freedom Security, Orphans Foster Homes, Spies, Terrorism, True Crime

Tags:

From School Library Journal

Grade 5-10-Alex Rider is giving it up. Being a teenage secret agent is just too dangerous. He wants his old life back. As he lies in the hospital bed recovering from a gunshot wound, he contemplates the end of his career with MI6, the British secret service. But then he saves the life of Paul Drevin, son of multibillionaire Nikolei Drevin, and once again he is pulled into service. This time his mission involves eco-terrorists, rockets to space, maniacal killers, and a less-than-idyllic tropical island. Is it all in a day's work, or will this truly be Alex Rider's last mission? The action-filled plot develops quickly and keeps readers on the edge of their seats. The over-the-top characters, with their exaggerated quirks and personalities, work well in this James Bond-like novel. Detailed background, technical, and political information, essential for any spy story, is uncomplicated and easy for most readers to understand. Though there are some references to previous missions, this title can certainly stand alone. Recommend it to your reluctant readers and get ready for them to line up for the rest of the series. _-Heather E. Miller, Homewood Public Library, AL_

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From

Gr. 6--9. In his sixth adventure Alex Rider runs afoul of a group of murderous "eco warriors" and befriends Paul Drevin, the lonely son of venerated multibillionaire Nikolai Drevin, who isn't what he seems. In fact, neither is Paul, as Alex finds out when he accompanies the father and son on a vacation to the family's luxurious home in Flamingo Bay, which happens to be the launching site of a rocket that will carry the observation module for Drevin's hugely publicized Ark Angel, the first hotel in space. Readers will need to suspend disbelief more than usual this time: Alex's solo trip into space is unquestionably over the top, and there are a few glitches in plotting. What's impossible to resist are the imaginative gadgets and the breakneck action, which Horowitz handles with his usual assurance and skill. Expect very high demand for this. The first title in the series, *Stormbreaker* (2001), is being released as a movie, and to celebrate the event, the publisher has redesigned the series' book covers to incorporate a snazzy holographic foil. *Stephanie Zvirin*

FORCE THREE

The bomb had been timed to go off at exactly half past three.

Strangely, the man it had been designed to kill probably knew more about bombs and terrorism than anyone else in the world. He had even written books on the subject. Looking After Number One: Fifty Ways to Protect Yourself at Home and Abroad might not be the snappiest of titles, but the book had sold twenty thousand copies in America, and it was said that the president himself kept a copy by his bed. The man did not think of himself as a target, but even so he was always careful. As he often joked, it would be bad for business if he was blown up crossing the street.

His name was Max Webber, and he was short and plump with tortoise-shell glasses and jet-black hair that was actually dyed. He told people that he had once been in the SAS, which was true. What he didn't tell them was that he had been dropped after his first tour of duty. In his forties he had opened a training centre in London, advising rich businessmen on how to look after themselves. He had become a writer and a journalist, frequently appearing on television to discuss international security.

And now he was the guest speaker at the fourth International Security Conference, being held at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the south bank of the Thames in London. The whole building had been cordoned off.

Helicopters had been flying overhead all morning and police with sniffer dogs had been waiting in the foyer. Briefcases, cameras and all electronic devices had been forbidden inside the main hall, and delegates had been made to pass through a rigorous screening system before being allowed in. More than eight hundred men and women from seventeen countries had turned up. Among them were diplomats, businessmen, senior politicians, journalists and members of various security services. They had to feel safe.

Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones were both in the audience. As the head and deputy head of MI6 Special Operations, it was their responsibility to keep up with the latest developments, although as far as Blunt was concerned, the whole thing was a waste of time. There were security conferences all the time in every major city but they never achieved anything. The experts talked. The politicians lied. The press wrote it all down. And then everyone went home and nothing changed. Alan Blunt was bored. He looked half asleep.

At exactly two fifteen, Max Webber began to speak.

He was dressed in an expensive suit and tie and spoke slowly, his clipped voice full of authority. He had notes in front of him but he referred to them only occasionally, his eyes fixed on the audience, speaking directly to each one of them. In a glass-fronted projection room overlooking the stage, nine translators spoke quietly into microphones, just a second or two behind. Here and there in the audience, men and women could be seen with one hand pressed against their earpiece, concentrating on what was being said.

Webber turned a page. “I am often asked which is the most dangerous terrorist group in the world. The answer is not what you might expect. It is a group that you may not know. But I can assure you that it is one you should fear, and I wish to speak briefly about it now.”

He pressed a button on his lectern and two words appeared, projected onto a giant screen behind him.

FORCE THREE

In the fifth row, Blunt opened his eyes and turned to Mrs Jones. He looked puzzled. She shook her head briefly. Both of them were suddenly alert.

“They call themselves Force Three,” Webber went on. “The name refers to the fact that the earth is the third planet from the sun. These people wouldn’t describe themselves as terrorists. They would probably prefer you to think of them as eco-warriors, fighting to protect the earth from the evils of pollution. Broadly speaking, they’re protesting against climate change, the destruction of the rainforests, the use of nuclear power, genetic engineering and the growth of multinational business. All very commendable, you might think. Their agenda is similar to that of Greenpeace. The difference is that these people are fanatics. They will kill anyone who gets in their way; they have already killed many times. They claim to respect the planet but they have no respect at all for human life.”

Webber clicked again and a photograph flashed up on the screen. There was a stir in the auditorium as the audience examined it. At first sight, they seemed to be looking at a picture of a globe. Then they saw that it was a globe sitting on a pair of shoulders. Finally they realized it was a man. He had a very round head which was completely shaven—including the eyebrows. And there was a map of the world tattooed on his skin. England and France covered his left eye. Newfoundland poked out over his right. Argentina floated around one side of his neck. A gasp of revulsion spread around the room. The man was a freak.

“This is the commanding officer of Force Three,” Webber explained. “As you can see, he cares about the planet so much, he’s rather let it go to his head.

“His name—or at least the name that he goes by—is Kaspar. Very little is known about him. It is thought he might be French, but we don’t even know for certain where he was born. Nor do we know when he acquired these tattoos. But I can tell you that Kaspar has been very busy in the last six months. He was responsible for the assassination of Marjorie Schultz, a journalist living in Berlin, in June; her only crime was to write an article criticizing Force Three. He planned the kidnapping and murder of two members of the Atomic Energy Commission in Toronto. He has organized explosions in six countries, including Japan and New Zealand. He destroyed a car manufacturing plant in Dakota. And I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, he enjoys his work. Whenever possible, Kaspar likes to press the button himself.

“In my view, Kaspar is now the most dangerous man alive, for the simple reason that he believes the whole world is with him. And in a sense he’s right. I’m sure there are many people in this room who believe in protecting the environment. The trouble is, he would kill every single one of you if he thought it would help him achieve his aims. That is why I’m issuing this warning.

“Find Kaspar. Find Force Three before they can do any more harm. Because with every day that passes, I believe they are becoming a more serious and deadly threat.”

Webber paused as he turned another page of his notes. When he began speaking again, the subject had

changed. Twenty minutes later, at exactly three o'clock, he finished. There was polite applause.

Coffee and biscuits were being served in the foyer after the session ended, but Webber wasn't staying. He shook hands briefly with a diplomat he knew and exchanged a few words with some journalists, then moved on. He was heading towards the auditorium exit when he found his way blocked by a man and a woman.

They were an unlikely pair. There was no way he would have mistaken them for husband and wife, even though they were about the same age. The woman was thin with short black hair. The man was shorter and entirely grey. There was nothing interesting about him at all.

"Alan Blunt!" Webber smiled and nodded. "Mrs Jones!"

Very few people in the world would have recognized these two individuals, but Webber knew them instantly.

"We enjoyed your talk, Mr Webber," Blunt said, although there was little enthusiasm in his voice.

"Thank you."

"We were particularly interested in your comments concerning Force Three."

"You know about them, of course?"

The question was directed at Blunt, but it was Mrs Jones who answered. "We've heard about them, certainly," she replied. "But the fact is, we know very little about them. Six months ago, as far as we can see, they didn't even exist."

"That's right. They were founded very recently."

"You seem to know a lot about them, Mr Webber. We'd be interested to learn where you got your information."

Webber smiled a second time. "You know I can't possibly reveal my sources, Mrs Jones," he said lightly.

Suddenly he was serious. "But I find it very worrying that our country's security services should be so ignorant. I thought you were meant to be protecting us."

"That's why we're talking to you now," Mrs Jones countered. "If you know something, I think you should tell us—"

Webber interrupted her. "I think I've told you quite enough. If you want to know more, I suggest you come to my next lecture. I'll be talking in Stockholm a couple of weeks from now, and it may well be that I shall have further information about Force Three then. If so, I'll be happy to share it with you. And now, if you don't mind, I'll wish you good day."

Webber pushed his way between them and headed towards the cloakroom. He couldn't help smiling to himself. It had gone perfectly—and meeting Alan Blunt and the Jones woman had been an unexpected bonus. He fumbled in his pocket and took out a plastic disc which he handed to the cloakroom attendant.

His mobile phone had been taken from him when he went in: a security measure he himself had

recommended in his book. Now it was returned to him.

Ninety seconds later he emerged onto the wide pavement in front of the river. It was early October but the weather was still warm, the afternoon sun turning the water a deep blue. There were only a few people around—mainly kids rattling back and forth on their skateboards—but Webber still checked them out, just to make sure that none of them had any interest in him. He decided to walk home instead of taking public transport or hailing a taxi. That was something else he'd written in his book. In any major city, you're always safer out in the open, on your own two feet.

He had only taken a few steps when his mobile rang, vibrating in his jacket pocket. He dug it out.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he seemed to recall that the phone had been switched off when he handed it to the cloakroom attendant. But he was feeling so pleased with himself, with the way his speech had gone, that he ignored this single whisper of doubt.

It was twenty-nine minutes past three.

“Hello?”

“Mr Webber. I'm ringing to congratulate you. It went very well.”

The voice was soft and somehow artificial. It wasn't an Englishman speaking. It was someone who had learnt the language very carefully. The pronunciation was too deliberate, too precise. There was no emotion in the voice at all.

“You heard me?” Max Webber was still walking, speaking at the same time.

“Oh yes. I was in the audience. I am very pleased.”

“Did you know that MI6 were there?”

“No.”

“I spoke to them afterwards. They were very interested in what I had to say.” Webber chuckled quietly.

“Maybe I should raise my price.”

“I think we'll stick with our original agreement,” the voice replied.

Max Webber shrugged. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds was still a great deal of money. Paid into a secret bank account, it would come tax-free, no questions asked. And it had been such a simple thing to do.

A quarter of a million for just ten minutes' work!

The man on the other end spoke again and suddenly his voice was sad. “There is just one thing that concerns me, Mr Webber...”

“What's that?” Webber could hear something else, in the background. Some sort of interference.

He pressed the phone more tightly against his ear.

“In your speech today, you made an enemy of Force Three. And as you yourself pointed out, they are completely ruthless.”

“I don’t think either of us need worry about Force Three.” Webber looked around to make sure he wasn’t being overheard. “And I think you should remember, my friend, I served with the SAS. I know how to look after myself.”

“Really?”

Was the voice mocking him? For reasons Webber didn’t quite understand, he was beginning to feel uneasy.

And the interference was getting louder; he could hear it in his mobile phone. Some sort of ticking.

“I’m not afraid of Force Three,” he blustered. “I’m not afraid of anyone. Just make sure the money reaches my account.”

“Goodbye, Mr Webber,” said the voice.

There was a click.

One second of silence.

Then the mobile phone exploded.

Max Webber had been holding it tight against his ear. If he heard the blast, he was dead before it registered.

A couple of joggers were approaching from the other direction, and they both screamed as the thing that had just moments before been a man toppled over into their path.

The explosion was surprisingly loud. It was heard in the conference centre where delegates were still drinking coffee and congratulating one another on their contributions. They also heard the wail of the sirens as the ambulance and police cars arrived shortly afterwards.

Later that afternoon, Force Three called the press and claimed responsibility for the killing. Max Webber had declared war on them, and for that reason he had to die. In the same phone call they issued a stark warning. They had already chosen their next target. And they were planning something the world would not forget.

THE BOY IN ROOM NINE

The nurse was twenty-three years old, blonde and nervous. This was only her second week at St Dominic's, one of London's most exclusive private hospitals. Rock stars and television celebrities came here, she had been told. There were also VIPs from abroad. VIPs here meant very important patients. Even famous people get sick, and the ones who wanted to recover in five-star comfort chose St Dominic's. The surgeons and therapists were world class. The hospital food was so good that some patients had been known to pretend they were ill so that they could enjoy it for a while longer.

That evening, the nurse was making her way down a wide, brightly lit corridor, carrying a tray of medicines. She was wearing a freshly laundered white dress. Her name—D. MEACHER—was printed on a badge pinned to her uniform. Several of the junior doctors had already placed bets on which of them would persuade her to go out with them first.

She stopped in front of an open door. Room nine.

“Hello,” she said. “I'm Diana Meacher.”

“I'm looking forward to meeting you too,” the boy in room nine replied.

Alex Rider was sitting up in bed, reading a French textbook that he should have been studying at school.

He was wearing pyjamas that had fallen open at the neck and the nurse could just make out the bandages criss-crossing his chest. He was a very handsome boy, she thought. He had fair hair and serious brown eyes that looked as if they had seen too much. She knew that he was only fourteen, but he looked older. Pain had done that to him. Nurse Meacher had read his medical file and understood what he had been through.

In truth, he should have been dead. Alex Rider had been hit by a bullet fired from a .22 rifle from a distance of almost seventy-five metres. The sniper had been aiming for his heart—and if the bullet had found its target, Alex would have had no chance of surviving. But nothing is certain—not even murder. A tiny movement had saved his life. As he had come out of MI6's headquarters on Liverpool Street, he had stepped off the pavement, his right foot carrying his body down towards the level of the road. It was at that exact moment that the bullet had hit him, and instead of powering into his heart, it had entered his body half a centimetre higher, ricocheting off a rib and exiting horizontally under his left arm.

The bullet had missed his vital heart structures, but even so it had done plenty of damage, tearing through the subclavian artery, which carries blood over the top of the lung and into the arm. This was what Alex had felt when he was hit. As blood had poured out of the severed artery, filling the space between the lung and the thoracic cage, he had found himself unable to breathe. Alex could easily have died from shock or loss of blood. If he had been a man he almost certainly would have. But the body of a child is different to that of an adult. A young person's artery will automatically shut itself down if cut—doctors can't explain how or why—and this will limit the amount of blood lost. Alex was unconscious but he was still breathing, four minutes later, when the first ambulance arrived.

There wasn't much the paramedics could do: IV fluids, oxygen and some gentle compression around

the bullet's point of entry. But that was enough. Alex had been rushed to St Dominic's, where surgeons had removed the bone fragments and put a graft on the artery. He had been in the operating theatre two and a half hours.

And now he was looking almost as if nothing had happened. As the nurse came into the room, he closed the book and settled back into his pillows. Diana Meacher knew that this was his last night in hospital. He had been here for ten days and tomorrow he was going home. She also knew that she wasn't allowed to ask too many questions. It was there in large print on his file: PATIENT 9/75958 RIDER/ALEX: SPECIAL

STATUS (MISO). NO UNAUTHORIZED VISITORS. NO PRESS. REFER ALL ENQUIRIES TO DR HAYWARD.

It was all very strange. She had been told she would meet some interesting people at St Dominic's, and she had been required to sign a confidentiality clause before she began work. But she'd never expected anything like this. MISO stood for Military Intelligence: Special Operations. But what was the secret service doing with a teenage boy? How had Alex managed to get himself shot? And why had there been two armed policemen sitting outside his room for the first four days of his stay? Diana tried to push these thoughts out of her mind as she put the tray down. Maybe she should have stuck with the NHS.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Looking forward to going home?"

"Yes."

Diana realized she was staring at Alex and turned her attention to the medicines. "Are you in any pain?"

she asked. "Can I get you something to help you sleep?"

"No, I'm all right." Alex shook his head and for a moment something flickered in his eyes. The pain in his chest had slowly faded but he knew it would never leave him completely. He could feel it now, vague and distant, like a bad memory. "Would you like me to come back later?"

"No, it's all right, thanks." He smiled. "I don't need anyone to tuck me in."

Diana blushed. "That's not what I meant," she said. "But if you need me, I'll be just down the hall. You can call me any time."

"I might do that."

The nurse picked up her tray and walked out of the room. She left behind the scent of her perfume—heather and spring flowers—in the air. Alex sniffed. It seemed to him that since his injury, his senses had become more acute.

He reached for his French book, then changed his mind. To hell with it, he thought. Irregular verbs could wait. It was his own future that concerned him more.

He looked around at the neat, softly lit room that tried hard to pretend it belonged to an expensive hotel rather than a hospital. There was a TV on a table in the corner, operated by a remote control beside the bed.

A window looked out over a wide north London street lined with trees. His room was on the second floor, one of about a dozen arranged in a ring around a bright and modern reception area. In the early days after his operation, there had been flowers everywhere, but Alex had asked for them to be taken away. They'd reminded him of a funeral parlour and he had decided he preferred being alive.

But there were still cards. He had received more than twenty and he'd been surprised how many people had heard that he'd been hurt—and how many had sent a card. There had been a dozen from school: one from the head; one from Miss Bedfordshire, the school secretary; and several from his friends. Tom Harris had sent him some photos taken on their trip to Venice and a note: They told us it's appendicitis but I bet it isn't. Get well soon anyway.

Tom was the only person at Brookland who knew the truth about Alex.

Sabina Pleasure had somehow discovered he was in hospital and had sent him a card from San Francisco.

She was enjoying life in America but missed England, she said. She was hoping to come over for Christmas. Jack Starbright had sent him the biggest card in the room and had followed it up with chocolates, magazines and energy drinks, visiting him twice a day. There was even a card from the prime minister's office—although it seemed the prime minister had been too busy to sign it.

And there had been cards from MI6. One from Mrs Jones, another from Alan Blunt (a printed message with a single word—BLUNT—signed in green ink as if it were a memorandum not a get well card). Alex had been surprised and pleased to receive a card from Wolf, the soldier he had met while training with the SAS.

The postmark showed it had been mailed in Baghdad. But his favourite had been sent by Smithers. On the front was a teddy bear. There was no message inside, but when Alex opened the card, the teddy bear's eyes blinked and it began to talk.

“Alex—very sorry to hear you've been hurt.” The bear was speaking with Smithers' voice. “Hope you get better soon, old chap. Just take it easy—I'm sure you deserve a rest. Oh, and by the way, this card will self-destruct in five seconds.”

Sure enough, to the horror of the nurses, the card had immediately burst into flames.

As well as cards, there had been visitors. Mrs Jones had been the first.

Alex had only just come round after surgery when she appeared. He had never seen the deputy head of Special Operations looking quite so unsure of herself. She was wearing a charcoal-grey raincoat which hung open to reveal a dark suit underneath. Her hair was wet and raindrops glistened on her shoulders.

“I don't quite know what to say to you, Alex,” she began. She hadn't asked him how she was. She would have already got that from the doctors. “What happened to you in Liverpool Street was an unforgivable lapse of security. Too many people know the location of our headquarters. We're going to stop using the main entrance. It's too dangerous.”

Alex shifted uncomfortably in the bed but said nothing.

“Your condition is stable. I can’t tell you how relieved I am personally. When I heard you’d been shot, I…”

She stopped herself. Her black eyes looked down, taking in the tubes and wires attached to the boy lying in front of her, feeding into his arm, nose, mouth and stomach. “I know you can’t talk now,” she went on. “So I’ll be brief.

“You are safe here. We’ve used St Dominic’s before, and there are certain procedures being followed. There are guards outside your room. There’ll be someone there twenty-four hours a day as long as necessary.

“The shooting in Liverpool Street was reported in the press but your name was kept out of it. Your age too.

The sniper who fired at you had taken a position on the roof opposite. We’re still investigating how he managed to get up there without being detected—and I’m afraid we’ve been unable to find him. But right now, your safety is our primary concern. We can talk to Scorpia. As you know, we’ve had dealings with them in the past. I’m sure I can persuade them to leave you alone. You destroyed their operation, Alex, and they punished you. But enough is enough.”

She stopped. Alex’s heart monitor pulsed softly in the dim light.

“Please try not to think too badly of us,” she added. “After everything you’ve been through—Scorpia, your father… I will never forgive myself for what happened. I sometimes think it was wrong of us ever to get you involved in the first place. But we can talk about that another time.”

Alex was too weak to reply. He watched as Mrs Jones got up and left, and he guessed that Scorpia must have decided to leave him alone, because a few days later the armed guards outside his room quietly disappeared.

And now, in just over twelve hours, he would be out of here too. Jack had already been planning the weeks ahead. She wanted to take him on holiday to Florida or perhaps the Caribbean. It was October and the summer was definitely over, leaves falling and cold breezes coming in with the night. Jack wanted Alex to rest and regain his strength in the sun—but secretly he wasn’t so sure. He picked up the textbook again. He never thought he’d hear himself say this, but the truth was he just wanted to go back to school. He wanted to be ordinary again. Scorpia had sent him a simple, unforgettable message. Being a spy could get him killed. Irregular verbs were less dangerous.

There was a movement at the door and a boy looked in. “Hi, Alex.”

The boy had a strange accent—Eastern European, possibly Russian. He was fourteen, with short blond hair and light blue eyes. His face was thin, his skin pale. He was wearing pyjamas and a large dressing gown which made him seem smaller than he was. He was staying in the room next door to Alex and really had been treated for appendicitis, with complications. His name was Paul Drevin—the surname was somehow familiar—but Alex didn’t know anything more about him. The two of them had spoken briefly a few times.

They were nearly the same age, and the only teenagers on the corridor.

Alex raised a hand in greeting. “Hi.”

“I hear you’re getting out of here tomorrow,” Paul said.

“Yes. How about you?”

“Another day, worst luck.” He hovered in the doorway. He seemed to want to come in, but at the same time something held him back. “I’ll be glad to leave,” he admitted. “I want to go home.”

“Where is home?” Alex asked.

“I’m not sure.” Paul was completely serious. “We live in London a lot of the time. But my father’s always moving. Moscow, New York, the South of France ... he’s been too busy even to come in and see me. And we have so many houses, I sometimes wonder which is my home.”

“Where do you go to school?” Alex had picked up on the mention of Moscow and assumed that Paul must be Russian.

“I don’t go to school; I have tutors.” Paul shrugged. “It’s difficult. My life’s sort of weird, because of my father. Because of everything. Anyway, I’m jealous of you getting out before me. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Paul hesitated a fraction longer, then left. Alex gazed thoughtfully at the empty doorway. Perhaps his father was some sort of politician or banker. On the few occasions they had spoken he’d got the impression that the other boy was friendless. He wondered how many kids were admitted into this hospital who had fathers willing to spend thousands to make them better, but who had no time to visit them while they were there.

It was nine o’clock. Alex flicked through the television channels, but there was nothing on. He wished now that he had accepted the sleeping pill from the nurse. A little sip of water and he would have been out for the night. And out of the hospital the next day. Alex was looking forward to that more than anything. He needed to start his life again.

He watched half an hour of a comedy that didn’t make him laugh. Then he switched off the television, turned off the light and curled up in the bed one last time. He rather wished Diana Meacher had come back to see him. Briefly he remembered the scent of her perfume. And then he was asleep. But not for long.

The next thing Alex knew, it was half past twelve. There was a clock beside the bed, its numerals glowing in the dark. He woke up reluctantly, trying to climb back down into the pit from which he had come. The truth was, it was difficult to sleep when he had done nothing to make him tired. All day he’d been lying there, breathing in the clean, conditioned atmosphere that at St Dominic’s passed for air.

He lay in the semi-darkness, wondering what to do. Then he got up and slipped into his dressing gown.

This was the worst thing about being in hospital. There was no way out, nowhere to go. Alex couldn’t get used to it. Every night for a week, he’d woken up at about the same time, and finally he’d decided to break the rules and escape from the sterile box that was his room. He wanted to be outside. He needed the smell of London, the noise of the traffic, the feeling that he still belonged to the real world.

He put on a pair of slippers and went out. The lights had been dimmed, casting no more than a

discreet glow outside his room. There was a computer screen gleaming behind the nurses' station but no sign of Diana Meacher or anyone else. Alex took a step forward. There are few places more silent than a hospital in the middle of the night and he felt almost afraid to move, as if he was breaking some sort of unwritten law between the healthy and the sick. But he knew he would just lie awake for hours if he stayed in bed. He had nothing to worry about. Mrs Jones was certain that Scorpia was no longer a threat. He was almost tempted to leave the hospital and catch the night bus home.

Of course, that was out of the question. He couldn't go that far. But he was still determined to reach the main reception with its sliding glass doors and—just beyond—a real street with people and cars and noise and dirt. By day, three receptionists answered the phones and dealt with enquiries. After eight o'clock there was just one. Alex had already met him—a cheerful Irishman called Conor Hackett. The two of them had quickly become friends.

Conor was sixty-five and had spent most of his life in Dublin. He'd taken this job to help support his nine grandchildren. After they'd talked a while, Alex had persuaded Conor to let him go outside, and he had spent a happy fifteen minutes on the pavement in front of the main entrance, watching the passing traffic and breathing in the night air. He would do the same again now. Maybe he could stretch it to half an hour.

Conor would complain; he would threaten to call the nurse. But Alex was sure he would let him have his way.

He avoided the lift, afraid that the noise of the bell as it arrived would give him away. He walked down the stairs to the first floor, and continued along a corridor. From here he could look down on the polished floor of reception and the glass entrance doors. He could see Conor sitting behind his desk, reading a magazine.

Even down here the lights were dimmed. It was as if the hospital wanted to remind visitors where they were the moment they came in.

Conor turned a page. Alex was about to walk down the last few stairs, when suddenly the front doors slid open.

Alex was both startled and a little embarrassed. He didn't want to be caught here in his dressing gown and pyjamas. At the same time, he wondered who could possibly be visiting St Dominic's at this time of night.

He took a step back, disappearing into the shadows. Now he could watch everything that was happening, unobserved.

Four men came in. They were in their late twenties, and all looked fit. The leader was wearing a combat jacket and a Che Guevara T-shirt. The others were dressed in jeans, hooded sweatshirts and trainers. From where he was hiding, Alex couldn't make out their faces very clearly, but already he knew there was something strange about them. The way they moved was somehow too fast, too energetic. People move more cautiously when they come into a hospital. After all, nobody actually wants to be there.

"Hey—how are you doing?" the first man asked. The words cut through the gloom. He had a cheerful, cultivated voice.

“How can I help you?” the receptionist asked. He sounded as puzzled as Alex felt.

“We’d like to visit one of your patients,” the man explained. “I wonder if you can tell us where he is.”

“I’m very sorry.” Alex couldn’t see Conor’s face, but he could imagine the smile in his voice. “You can’t visit anyone now. It’s almost one o’clock! You’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

“I don’t think you understand.”

Alex felt the first stirrings of nervousness. A note of menace had crept into the man’s voice. And there was something sinister about the way the other three men were positioned. They were spread out between the receptionist and the main entrance. It was as if they didn’t want him to leave. Or anyone else to enter.

“We want to see Paul Drevin.” Alex heard the name with a shiver of disbelief. The boy in the room next to his! Why would these men want to see him so late at night? “What room is he in?” the man in the combat jacket asked.

Conor shook his head. “I can’t give you that information,” he protested. “Come back tomorrow and someone will be happy to help you then.”

“We want to know now,” the man insisted. He reached into his jacket and Alex felt the floor sway beneath him as the man produced a gun. It was equipped with a silencer. And it was pointing at the receptionist’s head.

“What are you...?” Conor had gone rigid; his voice had risen to a high-pitched squeak. “I can’t tell you!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here? What do you want?”

“We want the room number of Paul Drevin. If you don’t give it to me in the next three seconds, I will pull the trigger and the only part of this hospital you’ll ever need again will be the morgue.”

“Wait!”

“One...”

“I don’t know where he is!”

“Two...”

Alex felt his chest hurting. He realized he was holding his breath.

“All right! All right! Let me find it for you.”

The receptionist began to tap hurriedly at the keyboard hidden below the top of his desk. Alex heard the clatter of the keys.

“He’s on the second floor! Room eight.”

“Thank you,” the man said, and shot him.

Alex heard the angry cough of the bullet as it was spat out by the silencer. He saw a black spray in front of the receptionist’s forehead. Conor was thrown backwards, his hands raised briefly.

Nobody moved.

“Room eight. Second floor,” one of the men muttered.

“I told you he was in room eight,” the first man said.

“Then why did you ask?”

“I just wanted to be sure.”

One of them sniggered.

“Let’s go and get him,” another said.

Alex was frozen to the spot. He could feel his wound throbbing angrily. This couldn’t be happening, could it? But it was happening. He had seen it for himself.

The four men moved.

Alex turned and ran.

EMERGENCY TREATMENT

Alex took the stairs two at a time, a hundred different thoughts tumbling through his mind. Who were the four men and why were they here? What did they want with Paul? The name Drevin meant something to him, but this wasn't the time to work out what it was. What could he do to stop them?

He came to a fire alarm in a red box on the wall and stopped beside it. For a few, precious seconds his fist hovered over the glass. But he knew that setting off the alarm would do no good. For the moment, surprise was all he had on his side. The fire alarm would only tell the men that they had been seen, and then they would go about their work all the faster, killing or kidnapping the boy long before the police or fire brigade arrived.

Alex didn't want to confront the four men on his own. He was desperately tempted to call for help. But he knew it would come too late.

He continued up the stairs, one small piece of knowledge spurring him on. The men had shown themselves to be single-minded and ruthless. But they had already made one mistake.

When they had set off, they had been moving in the direction of the lift, and Alex knew something they didn't. The lifts at St Dominic's were the original bed lifts, almost twenty years old. They were designed to carry patients up from the operating theatres on the first floor and had to stop without even the slightest shudder. For this reason they were very, very slow. It would take Alex less than twenty seconds to reach the second floor; it would take the men almost two minutes. That gave him one minute and forty seconds to do something. But what?

He burst through the doors and into the nurses' area in front of his room. There was still nobody around, which was strange. Perhaps the four men had created some sort of diversion. That would make sense. They could have got rid of the nurse with a single phone call and right now she could be anywhere in the hospital. Alex stood panting in the half-light, trying to get his brain to work. He could imagine the lift making its way inch by inch towards him.

He was painfully aware of the unevenness of the competition. The men were professional killers. Alex would have known that even if he hadn't seen them murder the night receptionist. It was obvious from their body language, the way they smiled, the conversation he'd overheard. Killing was second nature to them. Alex couldn't possibly fight them. He was unarmed. Worse, he was in pyjamas and slippers with a chest wound held together by stitches and bandages. He had never been more helpless. Once he was seen, he would be finished. He didn't stand a chance.

And yet he had to do something. He thought about the strange, lonely boy in the room next to his. Paul Drevin was only just fourteen—eight months younger than Alex. These men had come for him. Alex couldn't let them take him.

He looked at the open door of his own room—number nine. It was exactly opposite the lift, and was the first thing the men would see when they stepped out. Paul Drevin was asleep in the next room. His door was closed. Their names were visible in the half-light: ALEX RIDER and PAUL DREVIN.

They were printed on plastic strips that fitted into a slot on each door. Underneath, also on strips, were the room numbers.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a plan started to form in Alex's mind. Wondering if he had left himself enough time, he darted forward and snatched a teaspoon from a cup and saucer a nurse had left on the desk. Using the spoon handle, he prised his name and room number out of their slots, then did the same to the next door. It took another few seconds to snap the plastic strips back into place. Now it was Alex Rider who was asleep in room nine. The door to room eight was open and Paul Drevin wasn't there.

Alex ran into his room, pulled open the cupboard and grabbed a shirt and a pair of jeans. He knew what he had done wasn't enough. If the men glanced at the doors more than briefly, they would see the trick that had been played, because the sequence was wrong: six, seven, nine, eight, ten. Alex had to make sure they didn't have time to examine anything.

He had to make them come after him. He didn't dare get dressed in sight of the lift. He hurried out with the clothes—past the nurses' station, away from the two rooms. He came to a corridor leading off at ninety degrees. It ran about twenty metres to a pair of swing doors and another staircase. There was an open store cupboard on one side of the corridor and next to it a trolley with some sort of machine: low and flat with a series of buttons and a narrow, rectangular TV screen that looked like it had been squashed. Alex recognized the machine. There were also two oxygen cylinders. He could feel his heart pounding underneath the bandages. The silence in the hospital was unnerving. How much time had passed since Conor had been killed?

Swiftly he stripped off the pyjamas and pulled on his own clothes. It felt good to be dressed again after ten long days and nights. He was no longer a patient. He was beginning to get his life back.

The lift doors opened, breaking the silence with a metallic rattle. Alex watched the four men walk out.

Quickly he summed them up. Two were black, two white. They moved as a single unit, as if they were used to working together. He gave them names based on their appearances. The man who had shot Conor was the leader. He had a broken nose that seemed to split his face like a crack in a mirror. Alex thought of him as Combat Jacket. The next was thin, with crumpled cheeks and orange-tinted glasses. Spectacles. The third was short and muscular, and obviously spent a serious amount of time at the gym. He had a heavy dull metal watch on his wrist, and that gave him his name: Steel Watch. The last man was unshaven, with straggly black hair. At some point he'd been to a bad dentist, who had left his mark very visibly. He would be Silver Tooth.

All four were moving quickly, impatient after the long wait in the lift. This was the moment of truth.

Combat Jacket registered the open door and the empty bed inside. He read the name. At that moment, Alex appeared, walking down the corridor as if he had just been to the toilet and was returning to his room. He stopped and gave a small gasp of surprise. The men looked at him. And immediately made the assumption that Alex had guessed they would. Even if they knew what their target was supposed to look like, they couldn't see his face in the soft light. He was Paul Drevin. Who else could he be? "Paul?" Combat Jacket spoke the single word.

Alex nodded.

"We're not going to hurt you. But you're going to have to come with us."

Alex took a step back. Combat Jacket took out a gun. The same gun that he had used to kill the night receptionist. Alex turned and fled.

As his bare feet pounded on the hospital carpet, he was afraid that he had left it too late, that he would feel the white heat of a bullet between his shoulder blades. But the corridor was right in front of him. With a feeling of relief, he threw himself round the corner. Now he was out of sight.

The four men were slow to react. This was the last thing they'd expected. Paul Drevin should have been sound asleep in bed. But he had seen them. He had run away. As one, they surged forward. Their movements seemed clumsy—they didn't want to make any noise—but they were still making fast progress. They reached the corridor and saw the swing doors ahead. One of the doors was still closing. The boy had obviously passed through seconds before. With Combat Jacket in the lead, they pressed on. None of them noticed the store cupboard on their left. Combat Jacket pushed through the doors; Steel Watch and Spectacles followed. Silver Tooth was left behind—and that was when Alex made his move.

Alex had run the full length of the corridor, flung open the doors, then doubled back to the store cupboard.

That was where he was now. Moving on tiptoe, he slipped out. Now he was behind Silver Tooth. He was holding something in each of his hands, a circular disc, padded, trailing electric wires.

The machine he had seen on the trolley was a Lifepak 300 defibrillator, a standard piece of equipment in most British hospitals. Alex had seen defibrillators often enough in television dramas to know what they did and how they worked. When a patient's heart stopped, the doctor would press the pads against their chest and use the electric charge to bring them back to life. Alex had connected up this defibrillator in the last seconds before the lift arrived. It was designed to be easy to use and ready in an instant; the batteries were always kept fully charged. Gritting his teeth, he slammed the pads against the neck of the man in front of him and pressed the buttons. Silver Tooth screamed and leapt high in the air as the electric current coursed through him. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

The doors swung open again: Spectacles had heard the scream. He came back, half crouching, running forward, a knife in his hand. His face was twisted in an ugly sneer of anger. Something had gone wrong.

But how? Why hadn't the boy been asleep?

He didn't even make it halfway down the corridor. The full force of a ten-kilogram oxygen cylinder hit him right between the legs. His face went mauve and he dropped the knife. He tried to breathe, but oxygen was the one thing he couldn't find. He crumpled, eyes bulging.

Alex dropped the tank. It had taken all his strength to swing it, and he ran a hand across his chest, wondering if he had damaged himself. But the stitches seemed to have held.

Leaving the two unconscious men behind him, he ran back past his room and over to the main stairs. He heard the swing doors crash against the wall as the others came after him. At least he'd halved the opposition, even if it was going to be more difficult from now on. The remaining two men knew he

was dangerous; they wouldn't let themselves be surprised again. Alex considered disappearing. There were dozens of places he could hide. But that wasn't the point. He forced himself to slow down. He had to lead them away from rooms eight and nine.

They saw him. He heard one of them swear—a single, taut whisper of pure hatred. That was good. The angrier they were, the more mistakes they would make. Alex ran down the stairs. He felt dizzy and for a moment he thought he was going to pass out. After spending so long in bed, his body wasn't ready for this.

His left arm was hurting too.

The arm reminded him where he was going. The physio department was on the first floor. Alex had been there many times; it had been a necessary part of his treatment.

The bullet that had sliced through his artery had also done serious damage to his brachial plexus. This was a complicated network of spinal nerves leading into his left arm. The doctors had warned him that the arm would hurt; there would be stiffness and pins and needles—perhaps for the rest of his life. But once again Alex had youth on his side. After a few days of therapy, much of the pain had subsided. In that time, he had been put through a series of exercises—static resistance, stretching, reaction and speed work. By the end of the week, Alex had got to know the physio department better than any other department in the hospital. That was why he was heading there now.

He half stumbled through the doors and stood for a moment, catching his breath. First, there were two cubicles with beds where patients would lie while they were put through a series of exercises. A human skeleton—very realistic but in fact made of plastic—hung on a metal frame opposite. The corridor dog-legged, then continued past a series of doors and cupboards to another pair of swing doors at the far end.

Alex knew exactly what he would find in the cupboards. One of the rooms leading off the corridor was a fully equipped gym with cycling machines, dumb-bells, heavy medicine balls and treadmills.

The cupboards contained more equipment, including chest expanders and rolls of elastic. Each day, the physiotherapist had cut off a length of elastic and given it to Alex to use in simple stretching exercises.

These had been gentle at first but had become more strenuous, using thicker lengths of elastic, as he healed.

He opened the first cupboard. He had worked out what he was going to do. The question was the same as before. Had he left himself enough time?

Forty seconds later, the doors opened and Combat Jacket came in. He was breathing heavily. He was meant to be in command of this operation, and one day he would have to answer for it. Two of his men were lying unconscious upstairs—one of them electrocuted. And what made it worse—what made it unbelievable—

was that both had been taken out by a kid! They had been told it would be simple. Maybe that was why they had made so many mistakes. Well, he wasn't going to make any more.

He crept forward slowly, his fist curled around an ugly, square-nosed handgun. It was an FP9, a single-action pistol manufactured in Hungary, one of dozens coming in illegally from Eastern Europe. There were no lights on in this part of the hospital. The only illumination came from the moonlight streaming in through the windows. He looked to one side and saw the skeleton standing there like something out of a cheap fairground ride. The hollow eye sockets seemed to be staring at him. Warning him? The man looked away in disgust. He wasn't going to let it give him the creeps.

He glanced into the two cubicles. The curtains were drawn back and it was obvious the boy wasn't hiding there. Combat Jacket went past the skeleton and turned the corner. Now he found himself looking down the full length of the corridor. It was very dark but as his eyes adjusted, he made out a shape standing at the far end. He smiled. It was the boy! He seemed to be holding something against his chest. What was it?

Some sort of ball. Well, this time he'd made a big mistake. He wasn't going to get a chance to throw it. If he so much as moved, Combat Jacket would shoot him in the leg and then drag him to the car.

“Drop it!” Combat Jacket commanded.

Alex Rider let go of the ball.

It was a medicine ball from the gym. It weighed five kilograms and for a second time, Alex had been afraid he would split his stitches. But what Combat Jacket hadn't seen was that Alex had also taken a length of elastic out of the cupboard. He had tied it across the corridor, from one door handle to another, and then stretched it all the way back with the medicine ball. The ball was now a missile in an oversized catapult, and when Alex released it, it shot the full length of the corridor as if fired from a cannon.

Combat Jacket was only faintly aware of the great weight hurtling out of the shadows before it hit him square in the stomach, rocketing him off his feet. The gun flew out of his hand. The breath was punched out of his lungs. His shoulders hit the floor and he slid five metres before crashing into the wall. He just had time to tell himself that this wasn't Paul Drevin—that this was no ordinary fourteen-year-old boy—

before he blacked out.

Steel Watch had just entered the physio department. He heard the crash and turned the corner in combat position, his own weapon ready to fire. He didn't understand what was happening, but he knew that he had lost the initiative. What should have been a simple snatch had gone horribly wrong. There was a figure sprawled on the floor in front of him, its neck twisted and face drained of colour. A large medicine ball lay near by.

Steel Watch blinked in disbelief. He saw one of the doors at the end of the corridor swing shut. That told him all he needed to know. He followed.

Twenty paces ahead of him, Alex was once more making his way downstairs. It seemed the only way to go.

The stairs led him back to the ground floor, where it had all begun. The reception area was unnaturally silent apart from the soft hum of a refrigerated drinks dispenser. White light spilled over the rows of Coke and Fanta, throwing hard shadows across the floor. Three desks faced each other

across the empty space.

Alex knew there was a dead man behind one of them, but he couldn't bring himself to look. He could see the street on the other side of the glass doors. Should he make a break for it? Get outside and call for help?

There was no time. He heard Steel Watch coming down the stairs and dived behind the nearest desk, searching for cover.

A moment later, Steel Watch arrived. Peering round from his hiding place, Alex could see the timepiece glinting on his wrist. It was a huge, chunky thing, the sort divers wear. The man had an unusually thick wrist. His entire body was overdeveloped, the various muscle groups almost fighting each other as he walked. Although he was the last survivor, he wasn't panicking. He was carrying a second FP9. He seemed to sense that Alex was near.

"I'm not going to hurt you!" he called out. He didn't sound convincing and must have known it, because a second later he snapped, "Come out with your hands up or I'll put a bullet in your knee."

Alex timed his move exactly, racing across the main reception. Something coughed twice and the carpet ripped itself apart in front of his feet. That was when he knew the rules had changed. Steel Watch had decided to take him dead or alive. And it looked like he'd prefer dead. But Alex was already out of sight.

He had found another corridor with a sign reading RADIOLOGY—and he knew exactly where he was going. He had come here twice at the start of his stay in the hospital.

There was a locked door ahead of him—but Alex had watched the code being entered only a few days before. As fast as he could, he pressed the four-digit number, willing himself not to make a mistake. He pushed and the door opened. This part of the hospital was deserted at night but he knew the machines on the other side never slept. They were kept activated around the clock in case they were needed. And they had never been needed more than now.

Alex could hear Steel Watch coming up behind him, but he forced himself to stay calm. There was another lock to deal with, this one tripped by a switch concealed under one of the nurses' desks. Alex breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the hospital orderly who had made a joke about it as he had wheeled him in.

There was a large, heavy door ahead of him. It was covered with warning signs beneath a single word: MAGNETOM Alex knew what the warnings said. The orderly had told him. He opened the door and went in. There was a narrow, padded bench in front of him. It led to a large machine that reminded him of a tumble drier, a space capsule and a giant doughnut all rolled into one. There was a hole in the middle of it, the inner rim rotating slowly. The bench was designed so that it could be raised and passed slowly through the hole. Alex had been placed on the bench when he first came to St Dominic's, and the doctor had told him exactly what it did.

It was an MRI machine. The letters stood for magnetic resonance imaging. As Alex had passed through the hole, a scanner had taken a three-dimensional image of his body, checking the muscle damage in his chest, arm and shoulder. He remembered what the doctor had told him. He needed that knowledge now.

There was a movement at the door. Steel Watch had followed him in.

“Don’t move,” Steel Watch ordered. He was holding his gun at chest height. The silencer was pointing at Alex’s head.

Alex let his shoulders slump. “Looks like I went the wrong way,” he said.

“Well, now you’re coming with me, you little toe-rag,” the man replied. He ran his tongue over his lip.

“The others ... maybe they didn’t want to hurt you. But if you try anything, I’ll put a bullet in you.”

“I can’t move.”

“What?”

“I’m hurt...”

Steel Watch stared at Alex, trying to see what was wrong. He took a step forward. And that was when it happened.

The gun was torn out of his grip.

It was gone so fast that he didn’t understand what was happening. It was as if a pair of invisible hands had simply ripped his weapon away. It was whisked into the darkness, nothing more than a blur. Steel Watch cried out in pain. The gun had dislocated two of his fingers, almost tearing them right off. There was a loud clang as it hit the machine and stayed there, as if glued to the surface.

An MRI uses an incredibly powerful magnetic field to scan soft tissue. The strength of this machine was 1.5

Tesla and the notices on the door had warned anyone approaching the room to remove all items made of metal. An MRI can pull a set of keys out of a pocket; it can wipe a credit card clean at twenty paces. Steel Watch had felt its enormous power but he still hadn’t understood. He was about to find out.

Alex Rider had adopted the karate stance known as zenkutsu dachi, feet apart and hands raised. Every fibre of his being was concentrated on the man in front of him. It was a challenge to Steel Watch to take him on with his own bare hands, and Steel Watch couldn’t resist. He took a step forward.

And screamed as his heavy steel watch entered the magnetic field. Alex watched in astonishment as what is known as the missile effect took place. The man was lifted off his feet and hurled through the air, dragged by the watch on his wrist. There was a horrible thud as he crashed into the MRI machine. He had landed awkwardly, his arm and head tangled together. He stayed where he was, half standing, half lying, his legs trailing uselessly behind him.

It was over. Four men had entered the hospital and every one of them was either unconscious or worse.

Alex was still half convinced that any second he would wake up in bed. Maybe he had been given too many painkillers. Surely the whole thing was just some sort of ghastly medicated dream.

But it wasn’t. Alex went back to reception and there was Conor, sprawled behind his desk, a single bullet wound in his head. Alex knew he had to call the police. He was amazed that he hadn’t seen one single nurse during the entire ordeal. He leant over the desk, reaching for the phone. A cool night

breeze brushed across his neck.

That should have warned him.

Four men had come into the hospital but five had been assigned to the job. There was another man: the driver. And if the main doors hadn't just opened, there wouldn't have been a breeze.

Too late Alex realized what that meant. He straightened up as fast as he could, but that wasn't fast enough.

He heard nothing. He didn't even feel the blow to the back of his head.

He crumpled to the floor and lay still.

KASPAR

You're in pain. That's all you know. Your head is pounding and your heart is throbbing and you wonder if someone has managed to tie a knot in your neck.

It was a feeling that Alex Rider knew all too well. He had been knocked out by Mr Grin when he was at the Stormbreaker assembly plant, by the vicious Mrs Stellenbosch at the Academy of Point Blanc, and by Nile at the Widow's Palace in Venice. Even Alan Blunt had got one of his men to fire a tranquillizer dart into him when he had first infiltrated the headquarters of MI6.

And it was no different this time, the slow climb back from nothing to the world of air and light. Alex became aware that he was lying down, his cheek pressed against the dusty wooden floor. There was an unpleasant taste in his mouth. With an effort he opened his eyes and then closed them again as the light from a naked bulb dangling overhead burned into them. He waited, then opened them a second time.

Slowly he straightened his legs and stretched his arms and thought exactly what he thought every time it happened.

You're still alive. You're a prisoner. But for some reason they haven't killed you yet.

Alex dragged himself into a sitting position and looked around him. He was in a room that was completely bare: no carpet, no curtains, no furniture, no decoration. Nothing. There was a wooden door, presumably locked, and a single window. He was surprised to see that it wasn't barred, but when he staggered over to it, he understood why.

He was high up, seven or eight storeys. Dawn was only just breaking and it was hard to see through the dirty glass, but he guessed he'd been unconscious for a few hours and that he was still in London. It looked like he was being held in an abandoned tower block. There was another block opposite and, looking up, Alex could just see a huge banner strung between two wires running from the top of one building to the other. The first words were outside his field of vision but he could make out the rest: TOWERS

SOON TO BE AN EXCITING NEW DEVELOPMENT FOR EAST LONDON.

He went over to the door and tried it just in case. It didn't move.

His left arm was aching badly and he massaged it, wondering how much damage he had done to himself.

This was meant to be his last night in the hospital! How could he have allowed himself to get involved with a gang of murderers who had broken in...? What for?

Alex rested his shoulders against a wall and slid back down to the floor, cradling his arm. He was still barefooted and he shivered. His single shirt wasn't enough to protect him against the chill of the early morning. Sitting there, he played back the events that had brought him here.

Four men had come to St Dominic's, but they hadn't been interested in him. They had asked for the boy in the room next door: Paul Drevin. Suddenly Alex remembered where he had heard the name. He'd seen it in the newspapers—but not Paul. Nikolei. That was it. Nikolei Drevin was some sort of Russian multibillionaire. Well, that made sense. The men must have wanted his son for the most obvious reason.

Money. But they had accidentally kidnapped him instead.

What would they do when they found out? Alex tried to put the thought out of his mind. He had seen how they'd dealt with Conor, the night receptionist. Somehow he didn't think they'd apologize and offer him the taxi fare home.

But there was nothing he could do. He sat where he was, slumped against the wall, watching the sky turn from grey to red to a dull sort of blue.

He must have dozed off, because the next thing he knew, the door had opened and Spectacles was standing over him, an expression of pure hatred on his face. Alex wasn't surprised. The last time they'd met, Alex had slammed a ten-kilogram oxygen tank into his groin. If there was any surprise, it was that just a few hours later the man had found the strength to stand.

Spectacles was holding a gun. Alex looked into the man's eyes. They glinted orange behind the tinted glass and gazed at him with undisguised venom. "Get up!" he snapped. "You're to come with me."

"Whatever you say." Alex got slowly to his feet. "Is it my imagination," he asked, "or is your voice a little higher than it used to be?"

The hand with the gun twitched. "This way," Spectacles muttered.

Alex followed him out into a corridor that was as dilapidated as the room where he had been confined. The walls were damp and peeling. Many of the ceiling tiles were missing, revealing great gaps filled with a tangle of wires and pipes. There were doors every ten or fifteen metres, some of them hanging off their hinges. Once, they would have opened into people's flats. But it was obvious that—apart from rats and cockroaches—nobody had lived here for years.

Combat Jacket was waiting for them outside.

He had recovered from his encounter with the medicine ball but there was an ugly bruise on the side of his head where he had hit the wall. The two of them marched Alex down the corridor to a door at the end.

"In!" Spectacles said.

Alex pushed open the door and went through. He found himself in a large, open space with litter strewn across the floor and graffiti everywhere. There were windows on two sides, some of them covered by broken blinds. Alex guessed he was inside one of the flats, although the partition walls had been smashed through to make a single area. He could see an abandoned bath in one corner. In the middle, there was a table and two chairs. A man was sitting there, waiting for him. Spectacles prodded his gun into Alex's back.

Alex stepped forward and sat down.

With a shiver, he examined the man sitting opposite him. He was dressed in what might once have been a uniform but the jacket was torn and missing buttons. The man must have been about thirty years old but it was impossible to be sure. His face and head had been tattooed all over. Alex saw the United States of America reaching down one cheek, Europe on the other. His nose and the skin above his lips were blue, the colour of the Atlantic Ocean. Brazil and West Africa touched the corners of his mouth. If the man turned round, Alex knew he would see Russia and China. He had never seen anything quite so strange—or so revolting—in his life.

With difficulty, Alex tore his eyes away and looked around. Combat Jacket and Spectacles were standing on either side of the doorway. Silver Tooth was lurking in a corner. Alex hadn't noticed him in the shadows, but now he stepped into the light and Alex saw that his neck was swollen, two angry red marks burned into the skin. There was no sign of Steel Watch. Perhaps they'd been unable to peel him off the Magnetom.

The man with the tattoos spoke. "You have caused us a great deal of annoyance," he said. "In truth, you should be dead."

Alex was silent. He wasn't sure yet what to say.

"My name is Kaspar," the man continued.

Alex shrugged. "You mean ... like Casper the friendly ghost?"

The man didn't smile. "Why were you out of your room last night?"

"I needed some air."

"It would have been better if you had simply opened the window," Kaspar said. When he spoke, whole continents moved. It occurred to Alex that if he sneezed it would set off a global earthquake. "Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"No," Alex replied. "But it would be useful to have you around in a geography exam."

"I wouldn't have thought you were in any position to make jokes." Kaspar's voice was flat and unemotional. He gestured at the other men. "You have caused my colleagues a great deal of pain and inconvenience. They would like me to kill you. Perhaps I will."

"What do you want me for?" Alex demanded. "I will tell you." Kaspar ran a finger down the side of his face. It travelled from Norway to Algeria. "I can see that you are surprised by my appearance. You may think it extreme. But these markings represent who I am and what I believe in. We are all part of this world. I have made the world part of me." He paused.

"I am what you might call a freedom fighter. But the freedom I believe in is a planet free of the exploitation and pollution caused by rich businessmen and multinationals who would destroy all life simply to enrich themselves. We have global warming. The ozone layer has been decimated. Our precious resources are fast running out. But still these fat cats continue lining their pockets today with no thought or care for tomorrow. Your father is such a man."

"My father? You've got it all wrong—" The man moved incredibly quickly. He stood up and lashed out, hitting the side of Alex's head with the back of his hand. Alex snapped back, more startled than hurt.

“Don’t interrupt!” Kaspar commanded. “Your father made his fortune from oil. His pipelines have scarred three continents. And now, not content with damaging the earth, he is turning his attention to outer space.

Four species of wild birds have been made extinct by the launch of his rockets from the Caribbean. Apes and chimpanzees have been the unwilling victims of his test flights. He is an enemy of mankind and has therefore become a legitimate target of Force Three.”

Kaspar sat down again.

“There are those who think of us as criminals,” he went on. “But it is your father who is the real criminal, and he has forced us to act the way we do. Now we have decided to make him pay. He will give us one million pounds for your safe return. This money will be used to continue our struggle to protect the planet.

If he refuses, he will never see you again.

“That is why you were taken from St Dominic’s last night. You will remain with us until the ransom has been paid. I do not personally wish to harm you, Paul, but we have to prove to your father that we have you. We must send him a message that he cannot ignore. And I’m afraid that will demand a small sacrifice from you.”

Alex tried to speak but his head was reeling. It was all happening too fast. Before he could react, his right arm was seized from behind. Combat Jacket had crept up on him while Kaspar had been talking. Alex tried to resist, but the man was too strong. The cuff of his shirt was ripped open and the sleeve pulled back.

Then his hand was forced down on the table and his fingers spread out one by one. There was nothing he could do. Combat Jacket was holding him so tightly, his fingers were turning white. Silver Tooth approached from the other side. He had taken out his knife. He handed it to Kaspar.

“We could send your father a photograph,” Kaspar explained. “But what would that achieve? He will know by now that you have been taken by force. There are stronger ways of making our demands known, ways that he may find more persuasive.” He lifted the knife close to his chin, as if about to shave. The blade was fifteen centimetres long with a serrated edge. He examined his reflection in the steel. “We could send him a lock of your hair. He would, I’m sure, recognize it as yours. But then, he might take it as a sign of weakness—of compassion—on our part.

“And so I apologize, Paul Drevin. It gives me no pleasure to hurt a child, even a wealthy, spoilt child such as yourself. But what I intend to send your father is a finger from your right hand...”

Automatically Alex tried to pull back. But Combat Jacket had been expecting it. His full weight pressed down on Alex’s hand. His fingers were splayed, helpless, on the table.

“The pain will be great. But there are children all over the world who have only ever known pain and starvation, while boys like you languish in the playground of the rich. Do you play the piano, Paul? I hope not. It will not be so easy after today.”

He reached out and grabbed Alex’s little finger. That was the one he had chosen. The knife began its journey down.

“I’m not Paul Drevin!” Alex spat out the words urgently. His eyes had widened. He could feel the

blood draining from his face. The knife was still moving. "You've made a mistake!" he insisted. "My name is Alex Rider. I was in room nine. I don't know anything about Paul Drevin."

The knife stopped. It was millimetres above his little finger.

"Do it!" Combat Jacket hissed.

"I was awake last night," Alex insisted. The words came tumbling out. "I was coming back from the toilet. I saw your men outside my room. One of them pulled out a gun, and then they began chasing me. I didn't know what was happening. I had to defend myself..."

"He's lying," Combat Jacket snarled. "I asked him his name." He turned to Spectacles. "Tell him."

"That's right," Spectacles agreed. "We saw his room. Room eight. It was empty. Then he appeared. We called out his name and he answered."

Kaspar tightened his grip on the knife. He had made up his mind.

"I was in room nine, not room eight!" Alex was shouting now. His head was swimming. He could already see the knife cutting through flesh and bone. He could imagine the pain. Then suddenly he had a thought.

"What do you think I was in hospital for?" he demanded.

"We know what you were there for," Kaspar replied. "Appendicitis."

"Appendicitis. Right. Then look at my bandages. They're nowhere near my appendix."

There was a long pause. Alex could feel Combat Jacket still pressing down hard, longing for the cutting to begin. But Kaspar was uncertain. "Open his shirt," he ordered. Nobody moved. "Do it!"

Combat Jacket was still holding Alex as tightly as ever but now Silver Tooth stepped forward. He reached out and grabbed hold of Alex's shirt, tearing the top two buttons. Kaspar stared at the bandages crossing over his chest. Alex could feel his heart straining beneath them. "What is this?" Kaspar demanded. "I had a chest wound."

"What sort of chest wound?"

"An accident on my bike." It was the one lie Alex had told. He couldn't tell them what had really happened. He didn't want them to know who he was. "I met Paul Drevin," he admitted. "He's the same age as me. But he doesn't look anything like me. Just make a phone call. You can find out easily enough."

He took a deep breath. "You can cut off all my fingers if you want, but his father isn't going to pay you a penny. He doesn't even know I exist!"

There was another silence.

"He's lying!" Combat Jacket insisted.

But Kaspar was already working it out for himself. He had heard Alex speak. Paul Drevin had a faint Russian accent. This boy had obviously lived in England all his life. Kaspar swore and stabbed down with the knife. The blade buried itself in the table less than a centimetre from Alex's hand. The hilt quivered as he released it.

Alex saw the disappointment in the faces of Spectacles and Silver Tooth. But Kaspar had made his decision.

“Let go of him.”

Combat Jacket held him tightly for a moment longer, then released his arm and stood back, muttering something ugly under his breath. Alex snatched back his hand. His right arm was hurting as much as his left one. He wondered if Kaspar would send him back to the hospital. By the time he got out of here, he would need it.

But it wasn't over yet.

Spectacles and Silver Tooth were waiting to escort him out, but Kaspar gestured for them to wait. He was examining Alex a second time, reassessing him. It was impossible to see behind the markings on his face, to know what was going on in his mind. “If it turns out that you are who you say you are,” he began, “if you really are not Paul Drevin, then you are of no use to us. We can kill you in any way that we please. And I think it will please my men to kill you very slowly indeed. So perhaps, my friend, it would have been better for you if there had been no mistake. Perhaps the loss of one finger might have been the easier way.”

Silver Tooth was grinning. Spectacles nodded gravely.

“Take him back to his room,” Kaspar commanded. “I will make the necessary enquiries. And then we'll meet again.”

FIRE ESCAPE

It was late afternoon when the door opened and Combat Jacket came in. Alex guessed that he had been in the room for eight hours. He had been allowed out once to use a chemical toilet, and at around midday he had been given a sandwich and a drink by an unsmiling Spectacles. The sandwich had been two days past its sell-by date and still in the plastic wrapping, bought from a garage. But Alex wolfed it down hungrily.

Combat Jacket had been sent to fetch him. He led Alex back down the corridor to the flat where the interrogation had taken place, his face with its ugly, broken nose giving nothing away. There was something about the whole set-up that Alex didn't understand. Kaspar had told him they were freedom fighters—eco-warriors or whatever. They were certainly fanatics. The tattoos were ample proof of that. But the way they were treating him, the threats, the demands for money, seemed to belong to a different world.

They talked about pollution and the ozone layer; but they acted like thugs and common criminals. They had killed the night receptionist for no good reason. They seemed to have no regard at all for human life.

By now, Alex guessed, they must know the truth. So what were they going to do with him? He remembered what Kaspar had said and clamped down on his imagination. Instead, he searched for a way to break out of here. It wasn't going to be easy. The four men had already tested him once. They knew what he was capable of. They weren't going to give him a second chance.

Kaspar was waiting for him. There was a newspaper on the table in front of him but no sign of the knife.

Spectacles and Silver Tooth were standing behind him. As Alex sat down, Kaspar turned the newspaper round. It was the Evening Standard and the front-page headline told the whole story in just three words. Wrong boy kidnapped. Nobody was talking, so Alex quickly read the article. There was a photograph of St Dominic's Hospital but no picture of him or Paul Drevin. That didn't surprise him. He remembered reading somewhere that Paul's father—Nikolei Drevin—had managed to get an embargo on any photos of his family being published, claiming it was too much of a security risk. And, of course, MI6

would have prevented any picture of Alex being used. He didn't even get a mention by name.

A security guard was murdered in the small hours of the morning during a ruthless attack on a north London hospital. It seems almost certain that the intended target of the gang was fourteen-year-old Paul Drevin, son of one of the world's richest men, Russian businessman Nikolei Drevin. Drevin made the headlines earlier this year when he bought Stratford East Football Club. He is also the guiding light behind the hundred billion pound Ark Angel project—the first hotel in space.

In an astonishing development, police have confirmed that the gang managed to kidnap the wrong boy. This other boy, who has not been named, was discovered to be missing from his room following

major surgery. Speaking from the hospital, Dr Roger Hayward made an urgent plea for the boy's fast return. His condition is said to be stable but serious.

Alex looked up. Kaspar seemed to be waiting for him to speak. "I told you," he said. "So why don't you let me go? I've got nothing to do with this. I was just next door."

"You got involved on purpose," Kaspar said.

"No." Alex denied it but his mouth was dry.

"You switched room numbers. You answered to the name of Paul Drevin. You crippled one of my men and injured the others."

Alex said nothing, waiting for the axe to fall.

"I don't understand why you chose to become involved," Kaspar went on. "I don't know who you are. But you made your decision. You chose to become an enemy of Force Three and so you must pay."

"I didn't choose anything."

"I'm not going to argue with you. I am fighting a war and in any war there are casualties—innocent victims who just happen to get in the way. If it makes it any easier, think of yourself as one of them." Kaspar sighed but there was no sadness in the map of his face. "Goodbye, Alex Rider. It was a pity that we had to meet. It has cost me a million pounds in ransom money. It will cost you rather more..."

Before Alex could react, he was grabbed from behind and dragged to his feet. He didn't speak as he was forced back out of the room and down the corridor. This time he was thrown into another room, smaller than his previous cell. Alex just had time to make out a chair, a barred window and four bare walls before he was shoved hard in the back and sent sprawling to the floor.

Combat Jacket stood over him. "I wish he'd let me have a little time with you," he rasped. "If I had my way, we'd do this differently—"

"Move it!" The voice came from outside. One of the other men was waiting.

Combat Jacket spat at Alex and walked out. The door closed and almost at once Alex heard the unmistakable sound of hammering. He shook his head in disbelief. They weren't just locking him in. They were nailing the door to the frame.

Once again, he examined his surroundings. He wondered why they had chosen this particular room. The bars on the window made no real difference. Even if the window had been wide open, he was at least seven storeys up. He wouldn't have been able to climb out. And what exactly were they proposing to do?

They obviously weren't planning to come back and get him. Were they simply going to leave him here to starve to death?

The answer came about an hour later. The sun was beginning to set and lights were coming on in buildings all over east London. Alex was becoming increasingly anxious. He was on his own, high up in a derelict tower block. He had a feeling that Kaspar and the others had gone; he could hear nothing at all on the other side of the door. The silence was unnerving. He knew that MI6 would be doing everything they could, searching the city for him, but what hope did they have of finding him here? He

couldn't open the window. The room was empty. There was no way he could attract anyone's attention. For once he really did seem to be completely helpless.

And then he smelled it. Seeping through the floorboards, coming from somewhere deep in the heart of the building. Burning.

They had set fire to the tower block. Alex knew it even before he saw the first grey wisps of smoke creeping under the door. They had doused the place with petrol, set it alight and left him nailed inside what would soon be the world's biggest funeral pyre. For a moment he felt panic—black and irresistible—as it engulfed him. More smoke was curling under the door. Alex sprang to his feet and backed over to the window, wondering if there was some way he could knock out the glass. But that wouldn't help him. He forced himself to slow down, to think. He wasn't going to let them kill him. Only eleven days ago, a paid assassin had fired a .22 calibre bullet at his heart. But he was still alive. He wasn't easy to kill.

There were just two ways out of the room: the door and the window. Both of those were obviously hopeless. But what about the walls? They were made of hardboard and plaster. In the flat where he had been interrogated, they had been knocked through. Maybe he could do the same here. Experimentally he ran his hands over them, pushing and probing, searching for any weak spots. His throat was sore and his eyes were beginning to water. More and more smoke was pouring in. He stood back, then lashed out in a karate kick, his foot smashing into the centre of the wall. Pain shot up his leg and through his body. The wall didn't even crack.

That just left the ceiling. Alex remembered the corridor outside. It had been missing some of its ceiling tiles and he had seen a gap underneath the pipes and wires that ran above. The ceiling in this room was covered with the same tiles.

And they had left him a chair.

He dragged it over to the corner nearest the door and stood on it. The floor had almost disappeared beneath a swirling carpet of smoke. It seemed to be reaching up as if it wanted to grab hold and devour him. Alex checked his balance, then punched upwards with the heel of his hand. The tiles were made of some sort of fibreboard and broke easily. He punched again, then tore at the edges of the hole he had made.

Dirt and debris showered down, almost blinding him. But when he next looked up he saw that there was a space above him. If he could reach, he could haul himself up, over the door and jump down the other side.

He ripped out more tiles until the hole was wide enough to squeeze through. He could hear something a few floors below him—a faint crackling. The sound made his skin crawl. It meant that the fire was getting close. He forced himself to concentrate on what he was doing. The chair was wobbling underneath him. If he fell and twisted an ankle, he was finished.

At last he was ready. He tensed himself, then jumped. He felt the chair topple and crash to the floor—but he had done it! His hands had caught hold of an old water pipe and now he was dangling just below the ceiling, his arms disappearing into the space above. Once again he was all too aware of the stitches in his chest and wondered briefly if they would hold. God! The physio people had told him he ought to keep up his stretching exercises, but he doubted they'd had this in mind.

Gritting his teeth, Alex summoned all his strength to pull himself up into the cavity. His face passed through a cobweb and he grimaced as the fine strands laced themselves over his nose and mouth. His stomach touched the edge of the hole. He was half in and half out of the room. The crawl space was in front of him. The wall with the door was underneath him. Dozens of wires and insulated pipes ran inches above his head, stretching into the distance. Dust stung his eyes. What now?

Alex dragged himself along the pipe, bringing his feet up into the ceiling recess. He kicked down with his heels. More ceiling tiles fell loose and he saw the corridor below. There was a drop of about four metres.

Awkwardly he swung himself forward, then let his legs and torso hang. Finally he let go. He dropped down, landing in a crouch. He was in the corridor, on the other side of the locked door. With a sigh of relief, he straightened up. He was out of the room but he was at least seven floors up in an abandoned building that had been set on fire. He wasn't safe yet.

The crackling of the flames was louder out in the corridor. The block of flats had seemed damp and musty to Alex but it was going up like a torch. He could feel the heat in the air. The end of the corridor—where he had been interrogated—was already shimmering in the heat haze. Where was the fire brigade? Surely someone must have seen what was happening. Alex noticed a fire alarm set in the wall, but the glass was already broken and the alarm button was missing. He would have to get out of here on his own.

Which way? He only had two choices—left or right—and he decided to head away from the interrogation room. He hadn't seen a staircase when he had been taken there to meet Kaspar, but there might be one in the other direction. Smoke trickled up through the floorboards. It hung eerily in the doorways. Soon it would be impossible to see. Very soon it would be impossible to breathe.

He sprinted past the first room where he had been held and continued down the corridor, passing a set of lift doors. He didn't even think about trying the lift. Nothing in the building worked and the doors were welded shut. But next to the lift he found what he was looking for: a staircase leading up and down. The steps were made of concrete, zigzagging round behind the lift shaft. He rested his hand briefly on the metal stair rail.

It was hot. The fire was near.

But he had no choice. He began to run down, his bare feet slapping against the cement. He would just have to hope he didn't come across any broken glass. There were twenty-five steps between each floor; he counted them without meaning to. He turned a corner and saw a door leading into a smoke-filled corridor.

Definitely no way out there.

The further down he went, the worse it got. Twenty-five more steps and he came to another door. The corridor on the other side was well alight. There were brilliant red and orange flames, tearing into the walls, leaping up through the floor, devouring everything in their path. Alex was shocked by their speed and elemental strength. He had to put up a hand to protect himself, to stop his cheeks from burning.

He continued down. Force Three had started the blaze on the ground floor, allowing the air to carry the flames upwards. As Alex reached the third floor and began the next flight of steps down, he could

barely breathe. The smoke was smothering him. He wished he'd thought to soak his shirt in water, to cover his eyes and mouth. But where would he have found water in the building anyway? Another twenty-five steps. Then another. Alex was choking. He could feel the sweat dripping down his sides. It was like being inside a giant oven. How much further?

He saw daylight. A door leading out onto the street.

And that was when Combat Jacket appeared, a nightmare creature, stepping out of nowhere as if in slow motion, his gun raised in front of him. Alex saw the muzzle flash and threw himself backwards as a bullet shot past centimetres above him. He landed awkwardly on the stairs and he was already rolling as a second bullet spat into the concrete, sending fragments of cement flying into the side of his face. Somehow he scrambled to his feet and began to climb up again. Combat Jacket fired twice more but for a brief moment, the smoke was on Alex's side, and the bullets missed. Alex turned a corner. He didn't stop until he was back on the first floor.

He felt sick—a mixture of fury and despair. He'd almost made it. What was Combat Jacket doing there, waiting for him? Had he guessed that Alex might somehow manage to escape? It made no sense. But he couldn't think about it now. He was still trapped inside a burning building and he was rapidly running out of options. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. He looked along the corridor. It was a furnace. He couldn't go that way. He couldn't go down. That only left up.

Wearily, he started to climb. He made it to the second floor with just seconds to spare. As he continued up, there was a sudden rush of flames and a crash as part of the ceiling collapsed. Burning wood, metal and glass cascaded down. The fire had reached the stairs: now the way down was permanently blocked. He would have to try to make it to the roof. Perhaps he would be lucky. The police and fire brigade would be on the way. There might be helicopters.

Alex kept climbing. His hands were black; his face was streaked with tears. But he didn't stop. At the very worst, he would die in the open air. He wasn't going to let the fire finish him here.

He was no longer counting the steps. His legs were aching and the bandages around his chest had come loose. He ran past the eighth floor with a growing sense of despair. This was where he had begun. Forcing himself on, he continued to climb, past the ninth, the tenth ... eleventh ... twelfth... He was aware of the flames chasing him, filling the stairwell, licking at his heels. It was as if the fire knew he was there and was afraid of losing him. At last he came to a solid door with a metal push mechanism. He slammed his palms against it, terrified it would be locked. But the door swung open. The cool evening air rushed to greet him.

The sun had set but the sky was a brilliant red, the same colour as the fire that would be with him all too soon.

Alex was close to exhaustion. He had barely eaten all day. He was meant to be in bed. He almost wanted to cry but instead he swore, once, shouting out the ugly word. Then he wiped a grimy sleeve across his face and looked around.

He was on the roof, fifteen storeys up. He could see a water tank in front of him and a brick building that housed the cables for the lifts. Well, there were no working lifts and there was probably no water either, so neither of them would help. At some stage builders must have carried out some work up here. They had left a few lengths of scaffolding and plastic piping as well as a cement mixer and two

steel buckets, both half filled with cement that had long ago dried and solidified. Alex ran to the edge of the roof, searching for a fire escape down. He could feel the tarmac against the soles of his feet. It was already hot. Soon it would begin to melt.

There was no fire escape. There was no way down. He could see the street far below. No cars. No pedestrians. He was in some sort of industrial district in east London. The whole area looked like it was cordoned off, waiting for the money that would make redevelopment possible. The building opposite was identical to this one, similarly condemned. It stood less than fifty metres away, connected by the banner that Alex had seen when he woke up.

HORNCHURCH TOWERS

SOON TO BE AN EXCITING NEW DEVELOPMENT FOR EAST LONDON.

If he had come here in a year's time, he might have found himself standing on the balcony of a fabulous penthouse flat. Alex took in the view. He could see the River Thames in front of him. The Millennium Dome, unwanted and unloved, sat on a spur of land with the water bending round it. A plane dipped out of the sky, making for City Airport, which he could see over his shoulder. Alex raised his arm, waving for attention, but he knew at once that it was no good. The plane was too high up. It was already too dark. And the smoke was too thick.

He hurried back to the door. He would have to head down again and hope that the upper corridors were still passable. Maybe he could try the other side of the building. He pulled the door open carefully. It seemed impossible that Combat Jacket would have followed him all the way up, but he wasn't taking any chances. But as the door swung wide, he realized that Combat Jacket was the least of his problems.

A fist of flame punched at him. The stairs had become an inferno. At the same moment, there was an explosion and Alex was hurled backwards by a thousand fragments of burning, splintered wood which had been blasted up from below. He landed painfully on his back, and when he next looked up he saw that the door itself was now on fire. It was the only way off the roof. He was trapped.

Alex stood up. The tarmac was definitely getting hotter. He could no longer stay too long on one foot. Black smoke was pouring out of the stairwell, billowing into the sky. Now he heard the sound he had been hoping for—the wail of sirens. But he knew that by the time they got to him, it would be too late. There was another explosion below him. The windows were beginning to shatter, unable to take the heat. No way down. What could he do? The banner.

It was twenty metres long, about a hundred metres above the ground, a lifeline between this building and the next. The advertisement for Hornchurch Towers was suspended between two steel cables; the top cable was level with the roof, bolted into the brickwork. Alex ran over to it. Could he stand on the lower cable and hold onto the higher one? It would be like a swing bridge in the jungle. He could slowly inch his way across to the other side and safety. But the cables were too far apart—and the material was flapping in the wind. It would knock him off before he was even halfway.

Could he somehow crawl across on his hands and knees? No. The cable was about two centimetres thick. It wasn't wide enough to support him. He would lose his balance and fall. That was certain. So how? The answer came to him in an instant. Everything he needed was there in front of him. But it only worked when he put it all together. Could he do it? Another window shattered. Behind him, the

exit had disappeared in a whirlwind of flames and smoke. He was standing on a giant hot plate and it was becoming more unbearable with every passing second. Alex could see the fire engines, the size of toys, speeding along about half a mile away. He had to try. There was no other way.

He snatched up one of the lengths of plastic piping, weighing it in his hands. It was about six metres long and light enough for him to carry without feeling any strain. He had to make it heavier. Moving more quickly, he examined the steel buckets. They were half full of hardened cement, and weighed about the same. Somehow he had to attach them to the piping. But there was no rope. He choked and wiped sweat and tears from his eyes. What could he use? Then he looked down and saw the bandages flapping around his chest. He grabbed an end and began to tear them off. Sixty seconds later he was ready. It was Ian Rider he had to thank, of course. A visit to a circus in Vienna six years ago when Alex was only eight. It had been his birthday. And he still remembered his favourite act. The tightrope walkers.

“Funambulism,” Ian Rider said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s Latin, Alex. Funis means rope. And ambulare is to walk. Funambulism is the art of tightrope walking.”

“Is it difficult?”

“Well, it’s a lot easier than it looks. Not many people realize it, but there’s a trick involved...”

Alex lifted the plastic pole, the middle pressed against his chest, about three metres stretching out each side. There was a heavy steel bucket attached to each end, tied in place with a torn bandage. Every second he waited he could feel the heat increasing. His soles were already blistering and he knew he couldn’t wait any more. He walked to the edge of the roof. The metal cable running above the advertisement stretched out into the distance. Suddenly the other tower block seemed a very long way away. He tried not to look down. He knew that would make it impossible for him even to begin.

This was how it was meant to work. This was what Ian Rider had explained.

The wire acts as an axis. If you try to walk across the wire, you will fall the moment that your centre of mass is not directly above it. One wobble and gravity will do the rest.

But a long pole increases what is called the rotational inertia of the tightrope artist. It makes it more difficult to fall. And if you add enough weight to each end, you will actually shift your centre of gravity below the wire. This was what Alex had done with the two buckets. Provided he didn’t drop the pole, he would find it almost impossible to lose his balance. He had seen toys that worked on the same principle. It should be easy.

At least, that was the theory. Alex took a step. He had one foot on the very edge of the brickwork and one foot on the metal cable. All he had to do was lean forward, transferring his weight from one foot to the other, and he would be walking the tightrope. If the laws of physics worked, he would make it across. If they didn’t, he would die. It was as simple as that.

He took a deep breath and launched himself off the building.

He could feel the pole flexing as the buckets hung down, one on each side. For a terrifying moment the

world seemed to lurch sideways and he was certain he was about to fall. But he forced himself not to panic.

He clutched the pole more tightly against his chest and focused on the cable ahead of him. Briefly he closed his eyes, willing himself not to fight for balance, to let the laws of physics guide him.

And it worked. He wasn't falling. He could feel the cable cutting into his feet but miraculously he was stable. Now—how many steps to the other side? The flames were warming his back. It was time to move.

One step after another, he made his way across. He wanted to look down. Every nerve in his body was screaming at him to do just that, and his neck and spine were rigid with tension. But that was the one thing he must not do. He tried to imagine that he was back on the sports field at Brookland School. He had walked along the painted white lines often enough. This was exactly the same—just a bit higher up.

He was about halfway across when things began to go wrong. And they went wrong spectacularly.

First, the police and fire engines arrived. Alex heard the screams of the sirens directly beneath him and, before he could stop himself, he looked down. It was a mistake. He was no longer walking across a sports field. He was standing on a wire, insanely far above the ground. He saw people in uniform pointing up at him and shouting; he could just about hear their voices. One of the fire trucks was extending its ladder towards him but he doubted it would reach him in time.

The whole world began to spin. He felt a rush of panic that seemed to dissolve every muscle in his body and left him so weak that he thought he would faint. At the same time, the wind rose and the banner began to flutter like the sail of a yacht, the cable swaying from side to side. Alex knew that only the weights on the ends of the pole were keeping him upright. He was paralysed. There was nothing he could do.

And that was when the rooftop exploded. The flames had finally broken free. A fireball burst through the tarmac. The police and firemen dived for cover as bricks and pieces of metal rained down. The whole tower block was close to collapse. Alex felt a vibration travel up through his body and realized with horror that the metal stanchion holding the top cable was about to come loose. He couldn't wait for the firemen to reach him. He had perhaps seconds left.

The shock of the explosion broke his paralysis. Alex ran, pushing against the pole, like a sprinter breaking through the finishing line. The buckets swung madly, held fast by the bandages. Another explosion, louder this time. He didn't dare look round.

The other building was getting nearer but it still wasn't near enough. His arms were aching, barely able to hold the heavy weight. The cable was cutting into his feet. He was being battered by the wind. He wasn't going to make it. And then the cable snapped. Alex heard a sound like a crack of a whip and knew that his lifeline had been severed. With a cry, he dropped the pole and threw himself forward, reaching out for the roof just a few metres away. The cable and the banner crumpled under his feet. His hands missed the edge of the building and he began to plunge down. But now he was tangled up with the banner; it was folding itself around him. Alex grabbed hold of the material and gasped as he crashed into the wall. His feet were dangling in space. The cable was unravelling beneath him. But it was still attached to the rooftop just a few metres above his head. Alex waited until he was sure nothing else was moving. Then, painfully, he began to pull himself up.

Two of the firemen had managed to reach the roof. They were standing there, watching as the building opposite completed its spectacular collapse. They heard a noise and looked down. A boy had just crawled up over the edge, right by their feet. His shirt was in rags, and a few tattered bandages trailed from his chest. His face and hands were covered in soot. His hair was black with sweat.

“What the...?” They grabbed hold of him and pulled him to safety.

Alex sat down heavily. He gazed at the remains of the building where he had been held prisoner. There was very little of it left. Sparks leapt into the darkening sky.

“Nice night for a walk,” he said, and passed out.

R&R

Jack Starbright made the best scrambled eggs in the world. The secret, she said, was to use only free-range eggs, mix them with unsalted butter and a little milk—and then get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible. She didn't enjoy cooking and only used recipes that could be prepared in less than ten minutes.

This breakfast, for example, would go from fridge to table in exactly eight and a half.

She heaped the eggs onto two plates, added grilled bacon, tomatoes and toast, and carried them over to the kitchen table where Alex Rider was waiting. It was eleven o'clock in the morning and the two of them were back in the house in Chelsea where Alex had once lived with his uncle. Jack had first come there as a student, paying for her room by looking after Alex while Ian Rider was away. Gradually she had become a sort of housekeeper.

Now she was Alex's legal guardian and also his best friend.

Alex was wearing tracksuit trousers and a loose T-shirt; his hair was still wet from the shower. Two days had passed since his confrontation with Force Three and he was already looking a lot like his old self—

although Jack noticed that he was still massaging his left arm. She put the plates down and poured two mugs of tea. Neither of them spoke.

Alex had been taken straight back to hospital after his dramatic escape. None of the firemen could believe what they had seen, and assumed they had been sent to rescue someone who had trained at the circus.

Once again, MI6 had been forced to clamp down on the press reports. Photographs of Alex on the wire had appeared in newspapers all over the world, but he had been too far away to be recognized and his name was kept out of it. An ambulance had rushed him away before any journalists arrived, and by ten o'clock that night he was back in his old bed at St Dominic's. He fell asleep at once.

The next morning, he was woken by the nurse—Diana Meacher—coming into his room.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Tired,” Alex replied.

“Was that really you on the roof? I saw it on the news last night.” She went over to the window and raised the blinds. “Everyone's talking about it—although we've all been told we're not allowed to.” She came back to the bed and slipped a thermometer into his mouth. “And those men who broke in! We all know what you did and we think you're incredibly brave.”

“ ‘Ank you,” Alex said with difficulty. “I'd watch out, though, if I were you. Dr Hayward's hopping mad.

He says he didn't spend hours operating on you just for you to get nearly killed a second time. He'll

be here shortly.” She removed the thermometer and examined it. “Your temperature’s normal, though I’d say it’s the only thing about you that is!”

Later that morning, Dr Hayward came in and he certainly seemed less than cheerful. He gave Alex a thorough check-up, starting with his blood pressure and pulse rate and moving on to examine his wound.

He barely spoke a word as he did it.

“It’s lucky that you keep yourself fit,” he remarked at last. He looked and spoke like a long-suffering headmaster. “All those shenanigans could have caused you serious damage, but it looks as if your stitches have held and you’re generally in one piece.”

“When can I go home?”

“We’ll just keep you here until the end of the day. I’m afraid the people you work for want to speak to you.”

“I don’t work for anyone,” Alex said.

“Well ... you know who I mean. Anyway, there’s always a chance your system will react against the beating you’ve given it. So I want you to stay in bed today and I’ll come in and have another look at you after tea.”

He stood up. “And one last thing, Alex. I’m going to prescribe you at least two weeks’ rest and recuperation. I absolutely insist on it.”

“Can I go back to school?”

“I’m afraid not. Just over a week ago you were having major surgery. I know you’ve made an amazing recovery but there are still all sorts of risks—infection and all the rest of it. Two weeks’ holiday, Alex. And no arguments!”

Dr Hayward departed and Alex was left on his own. To kill some time, he went for a walk down the corridor, past room eight. It was empty. Nobody had mentioned Paul Drevin and it seemed that the other boy had gone.

There is nothing worse than being in hospital when you don’t feel you need to be there, and by eleven o’clock Alex was in a bad mood. Jack rang and he told her not to come in; he would see her when she came to collect him. His next visitor arrived just before lunch. It wasn’t the person he had expected.

He had realized that MI6 would want to know what had happened at Hornchurch Towers and that they would send someone to debrief him. He had expected Mrs Jones. But instead it was John Crawley who arrived, dressed in a nasty blue blazer with a crest on the pocket, and holding a box of Roses chocolates.

Crawley had once claimed to be a personnel manager, and Alex still wasn’t quite sure what he did at MI6.

He was in his late thirties with thinning hair and a rather worried-looking face. He looked like the sort of man who counted paperclips and kept his pencils in a special drawer.

He sat down by the bed. "Got you these," he said, handing over the chocolates.

"Thank you, Mr Crawley." Now that he was closer, Alex could see that the badge on the jacket belonged to Royal Tunbridge Wells Golf and Croquet Club.

"Mrs Jones apologized for not coming herself. She's in Berlin. She asked me to find out what's been going on. The police wanted to talk to you too, but I've had a word with them and they won't be bothering you.

How are you feeling, by the way? We were all very shocked by what happened. I had a run-in with Scorpia about ten years ago and it nearly did for me. Anyway, let's get back to Force Three. What exactly happened?"

Crawley took out a miniature tape recorder and laid it on the bed. Quickly, Alex took him through the events, starting with the moment the four men had walked into the hospital. It occurred to him that Crawley had let slip a little clue about his past. He too had fought against Scorpia. Had he once been a field agent himself? Alex described the fight in the hospital, his meeting with Kaspar in the derelict flat, the ransom demand and his escape from the fire. Crawley blinked several times as Alex spoke but didn't interrupt.

"Well, that's quite an adventure," he commented, when Alex had finished. "I remember when you and I first met. I could see straight away you were something special. I knew your father. I wasn't allowed to tell you that before. I worked with him a couple of times."

"In the field?"

"Yes. That was before..." Crawley ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I got hurt and had to stop. But you're just like him. Remarkable. Anyway, I have a few questions and then I'll leave you in peace." He had turned the tape recorder off; now he switched it back on. "The man who interrogated you. You say he called himself Kaspar. Can you describe him?"

"That's easy, Mr Crawley. He hasn't got the sort of face you'd forget."

"Tattoos?"

"Yes." Alex described the man who had come so close to removing his little finger.

"And he definitely told you that he represented Force Three."

"Yes. He talked a lot about global warming and that sort of thing."

"I would have said he rather added to it by setting fire to the building."

"I thought so too."

"What else can you tell me about him? Did he speak with an accent?"

Alex thought back. "I don't think he was English. He might have had a slight French accent. I'm not sure."

Crawley nodded. "Just one more question. The other three men in the tower block. You call them Combat Jacket, Spectacles and Silver Tooth. Did you hear any names?"

"No. I'm afraid not."

“Thank you, Alex.” Crawley pressed a button on the tape recorder. There was a click as it stopped turning.

“So who is Kaspar? Who are Force Three? What was it all about?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well,” Crawley began. “Let’s start with Nikolei Drevin. I suppose you know who he is.”

“I’ve heard of him. He’s a Russian multimillionaire.”

“Born in Russia, yes. But he’s more of a multi-billionaire, as a matter of fact. An absolutely wonderful man.

He lives in England a lot of the time, and he’s made it clear that he likes to think of himself as English.”

“He bought a football club.”

“Stratford East. That’s right. Nobody had ever heard of them but he’s forked out for some of the best players in the world and now they’re in the Premiership. He has a huge place in Oxfordshire, a penthouse near Tower Bridge and houses all over the world. He even has his own island out in the Caribbean.

Flamingo Bay. That’s where the launches take place.”

“Ark Angel,” Alex said.

“Ark Angel is the name of the space hotel that he’s building. It’s being put together piece by piece, and he has to send rockets up every now and then with the next component. You may not know this, Alex, but the British government are partners in the project and it means a great deal to them. The first hotel in space and it’ll be flying a British flag! Ten years from now, commercial space travel will be a reality. In fact, it already is. An American businessman has already gone into outer space. Paid twenty million dollars for the privilege. Once Ark Angel is up and running, more will follow. The most powerful and influential people in the world will be queuing up for tickets, and we’ll be the ones supplying them.”

“Kaspar mentioned outer space,” Alex said. “He didn’t seem too happy about the idea.”

“Kaspar is a fanatic,” Crawley replied. “It’s true that a few wild birds got wiped out on Flamingo Bay when the launch pad was set up. As a matter of fact, there aren’t any flamingos there any more. Friends of the Earth and the World Wildlife Fund got a bit upset about it, but you don’t see them going around murdering people. Force Three’s a different matter.”

“What do you know about them?”

Crawley scowled. “Not a lot. Before this year, nobody had ever heard of them. Then a woman in Germany wrote an article about them in Der Spiegel and a few days later she was shot in the street. The same thing happened in London just over a week ago. A chap by the name of Max Webber denounced them at a conference on international security and got blown up as a result. We’re looking

into both deaths right now

—that’s why Mrs Jones is in Berlin. Force Three seems to be something quite new. Eco-terrorists ... I suppose that’s what you’d call them. It’s all very alarming.”

“What about Kaspar?”

“Apart from what you’ve told us, we hardly know anything about him.”

“Well, he should be easy enough to catch.” It was something that had puzzled Alex from the start. The tattoos. “With a face like his, you’ll be able to spot him a mile away.”

“At least we know what we’re looking for. As for Drevin, he can take care of himself, I imagine. He’s got plenty of security out on Flamingo Bay. Our real worry is that Force Three might have a crack at Ark Angel.

They’ve already blown up a car manufacturing plant, a research centre and quite a few other installations.

Of course, they’ll have their work cut out. After all, Ark Angel is three hundred miles up in outer space. But none of this is any concern of yours.”

Crawley stood up. “You did a superb job, Alex,” he said. “I’m sure Drevin is enormously grateful. I wouldn’t be surprised if a large cheque didn’t turn up in the post. At the very least, you might get a couple of tickets to see Stratford East play.”

“I don’t want a cheque,” Alex said. “I just want to go home.”

“I hear the doctor says you can leave this evening.” Crawley slid the tape recorder into his pocket. “I’ve stayed long enough,” he said. “Very good to see you, Alex. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

I’m sure we’ll meet again.

Alex remembered the words now as he ate his scrambled eggs. Did Crawley really think he would ever work for MI6 again? If so he was very much mistaken. The strange thing was, he could think of dozens of boys at Brookland School who probably dreamt about being a spy. They’d imagine it would be fun. Alex had discovered the unpleasant reality. He’d been hurt, threatened, manipulated, shot at, beaten up and almost killed. He’d found himself in a world where he couldn’t believe anybody and where nothing was quite what it seemed. And he’d had enough. In two years he would be taking his GCSEs. From now on he was going to keep his head down, and the next time four terrorist kidnappers broke into a hospital he’d simply turn over and go back to sleep!

Jack Starbright had almost finished eating and Alex realized she hadn’t said a word since she had sat down. She’d been very quiet when she picked him up from hospital too.

“Jack, are you angry with me?” he asked. “No,” she said. But the single word told him the exact opposite.

Alex put down his knife and fork. “I’m sorry.” Jack sighed. “I don’t know what to say to you, Alex,” she said. “I’m not sure I can look after you any more.”

“Are you going back to America?”

“No! I don’t know.” She looked at him sadly. “You have no idea what it’s been like for me recently. First you tell me you’re going on vacation in Venice. The next thing I know, you’ve got caught up with some international band of criminals and then you get shot. How do you think I felt when they told me? But somehow you pull through and you’re in hospital, and any other kid would just stay there and get better.

But not you! You have to take on a gang of kidnappers and nearly get killed all over again.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Alex protested. “It just happened.”

“I know. That’s what I tell myself. But the fact is, I feel completely useless.” She fell silent. “And I don’t want to be sitting here next time when they tell me you didn’t make it. I couldn’t bear that.”

Alex went over to her. “There isn’t going to be a next time,” he said. “And you’re not useless, Jack. I don’t know what I’d do without you. There’s no one else to look after me. And it’s not just that. I sometimes think you’re the only person who really knows me. I only feel normal when I’m with you.”

Jack stood up and gave him a hug. “Just my luck,” she said ruefully. “All the fourteen-year-olds in the world, and I end up looking after you.”

The phone rang in the hall.

“I’ll get it,” she said.

Alex took the plates over to the dishwasher and began to stack them. About two minutes later, Jack came back in. There was an odd look on her face.

“Who was it?” he asked.

“It was for you. I don’t believe it! That was Nikolei Drevin.”

“He rang himself?”

“Yes. He’s invited you to have tea with him this afternoon. He’s giving a press conference at the Waterfront Hotel and he wanted to know if you’d come along and meet him afterwards.”

“What did you say?”

“Well, I told him I’d ask you and he said he’d send a car.” She shrugged. “I guess he expected you to say yes.”

Alex thought for a moment. Mr Crawley had said that Drevin would probably get in touch. “Do you think I should go?”

Jack sighed. “I don’t know. I suppose he wants to thank you. After all, you saved him one million pounds.

And you stopped his son getting hurt.”

Alex remembered Paul Drevin. He wondered if the other boy would be at the hotel.

“I could call him back and say you’re too tired,” Jack added.

For a moment, Alex was tempted. The last time he’d met a multimillionaire, it had been Damian Cray—and the experience had nearly killed him. On the other hand, this was different. Drevin was a

target. It was the man called Kaspar who was the enemy. And it was fair enough that Drevin should want to meet him after what had happened. Alex felt awkward about saying no.

Sometimes it's the tiniest things that can mean the difference between life and death. A few centimetres of kerb had saved Alex when he stepped off the pavement on Liverpool Street just as a sniper fired at him.

Now two words were going to drag him back into the world he thought he'd left behind. "Let's go."

AT THE WATERFRONT

The Waterfront Hotel was brand new—a silver and glass tower rising above the Thames at St Katharine’s Dock. Looking up the river, Alex could see Tower Bridge with HMS Belfast moored near by. He didn’t look the other way. He was only a few miles from where he’d been held prisoner. He didn’t need any reminder of that.

Behind him, Jack Starbright stepped out of the ordinary London taxi that had brought them here. At first she had been a little disgruntled. “So what happened to the Rolls-Royce?” she wondered out loud. But in the end she agreed that Drevin had made the right decision. The last thing either of them wanted was to make a grand entrance.

They walked into a foyer where everything seemed to be white or made of glass. A young woman was waiting there to greet them.

“Hi,” she said. “You must be Alex Rider and Jack Starbright. Mr Drevin asked me to look out for you.” She spoke with an American accent. “My name’s Tamara Knight. I’m Mr Drevin’s personal assistant.”

Alex cast an eye over her as they shook hands. Tamara Knight was twenty-five, although she looked much younger. She was not much taller than he was, with light brown hair tied back, and attractive blue eyes.

Alex felt that the formal business suit and brightly polished leather shoes didn’t suit her. He also wished she’d smile a bit more. She didn’t look at all pleased to see him.

“Mr Drevin is still tied up with his press conference,” she explained as she led them across the central atrium of the hotel. Silver and glass lifts rose and fell around them, travelling silently on hidden cables. A group of Japanese businessmen walked across the marble floor. “He said you were welcome to look in if you wanted to. Or you can wait for him in his private suite.”

“I’d like to know what a suite costs here,” Jack muttered.

Tamara Knight smiled coldly. “It doesn’t cost Mr Drevin anything. He owns the hotel.”

“Let’s take a look at the press conference,” Alex said.

“Of course. He’s talking about Ark Angel. I’m sure you’ll find it interesting.”

She led them up a wide flight of stairs and along a corridor until they came to a pair of smoked glass doors.

Two large men in suits were guarding this entrance. “We’ll slip in at the back,” Tamara whispered. “Just take a seat. Nobody will notice you.”

She nodded and one of the men opened the doors.

Alex went through and found himself in a wide, imposing room with large windows giving a panoramic view of the river. There were about a hundred journalists sitting in rows facing a long table on a platform.

The words ARK ANGEL had been spelled out in solid steel letters, each one two metres high, and there were photographs of the earth, taken from space, suspended on thin wires. Three people were seated behind the table. One was the minister for science and innovation. The other looked like some sort of civil servant. Alex didn't recognize him. The man in the middle was Nikolei Drevin.

Drevin was unimpressive. That was Alex's first thought. If he'd bumped into him in the street he might have mistaken him for a bank manager or an accountant. Drevin was a serious-looking man in his forties with watery, grey eyes and hair that had once been fair but was now fading to grey. He had bad skin; there was a rash around his chin and neck as if he'd had trouble shaving. All his clothes—his suit, his shirt with its buttoned-down collar, the plain silk tie—looked brand new and expensive. But they did nothing for him. He wore them with as much style as a mannequin in a shop window. Alex noticed a gold watch on one hand. There was a ring made of platinum or white gold on the other.

Drevin seemed dwarfed by his surroundings. He was physically smaller than the two men who were sharing the platform with him. The minister had been answering a question when Alex came in. Drevin was fidgeting nervously, twisting the ring on his finger. Tamara gestured to a seat and Alex sat down. The minister finished talking and the other man looked around for another question.

One of the journalists raised a hand. "I understand that Ark Angel is now two months behind schedule and three hundred million dollars over budget," he said. "I'd like to ask Mr Drevin if he now regrets getting involved."

"You are mistaken," Drevin replied, and at once Alex could hear the accent in his voice. It was more pronounced than his son's had been. He spoke slowly, accentuating each word. "Ark Angel is actually three hundred million pounds over budget. This is a British project, you must remember." There was a murmur of laughter around the room. Drevin shrugged. "Some difficulties were to be expected," he went on. "This is the most ambitious building project of the twenty-first century. A fully functioning hotel in space! But do I regret it? Of course not. What we are talking about is the beginning of space tourism, the greatest adventure of our lifetime. A hundred years from now, it will not only be possible to travel to the edge of the universe, it will be cheap! Maybe one day your great-grandchildren will walk on the moon. And they will remember that it all began with Ark Angel. It all began here."

Another hand went up. "How is your son? Does it concern you that the people who tried to kidnap him are still at large?"

Jack nudged Alex. They had arrived at the right time.

"I do not normally speak about my family," Drevin replied. "But I will say this. These people—Force Three

—claim they are fighting for the environment. It is true that the wildlife on Flamingo Bay was disturbed when we launched our first rockets, and I very much regret that. But I have only contempt for these people.

They tried to extort money from me. They are common criminals and I have every confidence that the British or European police will soon bring them to justice."

"Absolutely!" agreed the minister.

“We have time for just one more question,” the second man said.

A bearded man sitting in the front row raised a nicotine-stained finger. “I have a question,” he said. “I’ve heard rumours that the federal government of the United States is currently investigating Mr Drevin.

Apparently they’re looking into certain financial irregularities. Is there any truth in that?”

“Mr Drevin is not here to answer questions about his personal affairs.” The civil servant scowled and the minister nodded.

Drevin cut in. “It’s all right.” He didn’t seem concerned. He looked the journalist straight in the eye. “I am a businessman,” he said. “I am, you might agree, a fairly successful businessman.” That produced a few smiles. Everyone in the room was aware that they were being addressed by one of the richest people in the world. “It is absolutely true that the CIA are looking into my affairs. It would be surprising if they weren’t.

It’s their job. But...”—he spread his hands—“I have nothing to hide; indeed, I am willing to offer them my full cooperation.” He paused. “It is possible that they will find some irregularities. I went out to lunch last week and forgot to keep the receipt. If they decide to prosecute me because of it, I’ll make sure you’re the first to know.”

This time there was real laughter and even a scattering of applause. The man with the beard blushed and buried himself in his notebook. The other journalists stood up and began to file out. The press conference was over.

“He’s such a brilliant speaker,” Tamara Knight said, and Alex couldn’t doubt the enthusiasm in her voice.

She led Alex and Jack back the way they’d come, then across the atrium and over to one of the lifts. Once inside, she produced a key. The building had twenty-five storeys; the key activated the button for the top floor.

The doors closed and they were whisked upwards at speed. Alex felt his stomach sink as the atrium disappeared beneath them. Twenty floors up, the lift entered a solid shaft and the view was blocked.

Another few seconds and they slowed down. The lift stopped and the doors slid open.

They had arrived.

They were in a huge room with windows on two sides giving breathtaking views over St Katharine’s Dock, the yachts and cruisers resting at their moorings far below. Tower Bridge was close by. It looked unreal, a toy replica, sitting in the afternoon sun. Alex looked around him. The room was simply but expensively furnished with three Persian rugs spread over light wood floorboards. The furniture was modern. On one side stood a dining-room table with a dozen leather chairs. A corridor ran past a black Bechstein grand piano to a closed door at the end. There was a sunken area in the middle of the room with three oversized sofas and a glass coffee table. Tea—sandwiches and biscuits—had already been served.

“Quite a place!” Jack said.

“This is where Mr Drevin stays when he’s in London.” Tamara Knight pointed out of one window. “You see the boat third from the left? The Crimean Star. That belongs to him too.”

Jack gasped. The vessel was gleaming white, the size of a small ocean liner. “Have you been on board?” she asked.

“Certainly not. My work with Mr Drevin doesn’t allow me to enter his private quarters,” she explained primly.

Just then the door at the end of the corridor opened and Nikolei Drevin came in. It occurred to Alex that there must be a second lift, bringing him up to another part of the penthouse. He was alone, hands clasped in front of him, his fingers tugging at the ring. “Thank you very much, Miss Knight,” he said. “You can leave us now.”

“Yes, Mr Drevin.”

“Have you made the arrangements for Saturday?”

“I’ve left the file on your desk, Mr Drevin.”

“Good. I’ll talk with you later.” Tamara Knight nodded at Alex. “It was good to meet you,” she said—but without a lot of enthusiasm. Then she turned and walked back into the lift. The doors closed and she was gone.

For the first time, Nikolei Drevin seemed to relax. He walked up to Alex and rested a hand on each shoulder, and for a second Alex wondered if he was going to kiss him. Instead Drevin held him firmly in what was almost an embrace. “You’re Alex Rider,” he said. “I am very, very happy to meet you.” He let Alex go and turned to Jack. “Miss Starbright.” He shook hands with her. “I am so glad you were able to come. Please, will you sit down?” He led them to the sofas and picked up the teapot. “Tea?” he asked.

“Thank you.”

Nobody spoke while he poured. At last he sat back and studied his two guests. “I cannot tell you how grateful I am, Alex,” he said. “Although I hope you will permit me to try. You quite possibly saved my son’s life. Certainly you saved him from a terrible ordeal. I am very much in your debt.”

“How is he?” Alex asked.

“Paul is well, thank you. Please, help yourself...”

Jack took a sandwich but Alex wasn’t hungry. He was feeling a little uncomfortable being this close to Drevin. The man was only a few inches taller than he was, and still seemed very ordinary. And yet he radiated power. It was the same with all the rich people Alex had met. Their money, the billions of pounds in their bank accounts, spoke before they did.

“I should be asking how you are, Alex,” Drevin went on. “I understand you were recovering from a chest injury. A bike accident?”

“Yes.” Alex hated lying but that was the story that had been agreed.

“Alex is very accident-prone,” Jack muttered, holding up her sandwich.

“Well, it was very lucky for me that you should end up in the room next to Paul. I still find it hard to believe that you acted the way you did. But let me get straight to the point. I am sure you know who I am. I don’t seek attention, but the papers like to write about me, especially when my team loses. I am a very wealthy man. If there is anything that you want in the world, Alex, I can give it to you. I don’t say this as a boast. I mean it. You have done me a great service and I would like to repay you.”

Alex thought for a moment. “There’s nothing I really want, thank you,” he said. “I’m glad I was able to help your son. But it just sort of happened. I don’t need any reward.”

Drevin nodded. “I had a feeling you might say that, and I’m afraid I can’t accept it as an answer. So I would like to make a proposition.” He paused. “I spoke to your doctor this morning. Dr Hayward. You might like to know that I have made a donation of two million pounds on your behalf towards a new cardiology wing at St Dominic’s.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Alex said. “So long as they don’t name it after me.”

Drevin smiled. “Don’t worry! Dr Hayward tells me that you must not return to school for a couple of weeks. What I would like to propose is that you come and stay with me, as my guest. I’d be very glad to look after you while you recuperate. I employ a full-time medical staff, so you will be in safe hands if any complications should arise. More to the point, my chef is world class. Everything you want will be given to you. Miss Starbright is also very welcome.”

“I’m not sure—” Alex began. “Please, Alex!” Drevin interrupted. “There’s something I haven’t mentioned.

My son, Paul. He’s almost your age and he told me that you spoke together a few times in hospital. I know he would welcome your company. Paul doesn’t meet many other boys—that’s largely my fault. I’m afraid for him. There’s always the danger that someone will try to get at me through him. What happened at St Dominic’s is proof of that. He met you and liked you, and it would be good for him to have someone else around for a while. You’d be doing me a favour if you agreed to come.”

He paused. Alex felt the grey eyes examining him.

“I want to offer you two weeks with more luxury than you have ever known in your life. We’ll start here in England. I can’t leave until the weekend; I have business and, more importantly, we’re playing Chelsea on Saturday and I can’t miss that. After that I’m flying to New York. I have an apartment there, and again there is some business I have to take care of. You see? Paul is always on his own.”

He put down his cup and leant forward. Although his tone hadn’t changed, Alex could sense his energy and excitement.

“But in just over a week’s time, there’s something you really can’t miss. We have a launch at Flamingo Bay.

Have you ever seen a rocket being fired? It’s an unforgettable experience. If the weather’s right, it’ll blast off at exactly nine o’clock local time on Wednesday morning. It’ll be carrying the observation module for Ark Angel. It’s taken us three years to build. It will be the very heart of Ark Angel; the communications centre, a window like no other window in the world. Paul will, of course, be there, and I want you to be there with him. I have a house on the island and the beaches are spectacular. After the launch, you can stay for as long as you like.”

Alex said nothing. He wanted to go. He had never seen a rocket launch and it sounded like the sort of adventure he could actually enjoy—without anyone trying to kill him. And yet...

Drevin seemed to sense his uncertainty. "I'm sure Dr Hayward would agree that a bit of Caribbean sun would do you good," he said. "Please! Don't refuse me. I have to tell you, I've already made up my mind and I'm the sort of person who is used to getting his own way."

Alex turned to Jack. He still wasn't sure. And he was vaguely aware that something was bothering him. It was something Drevin had said. It didn't add up. "What do you think?" he asked.

Jack's eyes were gleaming. She had obviously been impressed by Drevin, the penthouse, the Crimean Star.

"I think it's a great idea," she said. "A couple of weeks in the sun are exactly what you need. And I'm sure Mr Drevin will look after you."

"You have my word."

Alex nodded. "OK then. Thank you." He took a sandwich. "But I think I should warn you: I'm a Chelsea supporter."

Drevin smiled. "That's all right. Nobody's perfect. I'll send a driver to collect you—shall we say the day after tomorrow? He'll drive you down to Neverglade—that's my house in Oxfordshire. Paul is there now. I must call him and let him know you're coming." He glanced at his watch. "And now, if you'll forgive me, I must leave you. I have a meeting at the Bank of England."

"Is that where you have your account?" Jack asked.

"One of them." He stood up. "Miss Knight will show you out when you have finished—and she'll also arrange a car to take you home. Thank you again, Alex. I know you're not going to regret this."

Another twist of the ring. Alex had noticed that his hands were never still. Drevin left the way he had come in.

There was a long silence.

"Wow!" Jack exclaimed.

"Flamingo Bay..." Alex murmured.

"It's exactly what the doctor ordered, Alex." She helped herself to another sandwich. "It couldn't have come at a better time."

"Sure..."

But Alex wasn't sure. What was it that was bothering him?

Yes. That was it.

Paul Drevin was a target. That was what Drevin had said. He was always in danger.

So why had he been on his own? That night at the hospital, four men had broken in to kidnap him. They had known he was there.

But there hadn't been a single guard in sight.

THE LAP OF LUXURY

Welcome to Neverglade,” Paul Drevin said.

Alex stepped out of the luxury car that had brought him here and looked around. He had seen wealth before. He had once gone undercover as the son of a supermarket magnate, which had meant spending a week in a mansion in Lancashire. But this place was something else again.

His first sight of Drevin’s country estate had been a pretty but very ordinary gatehouse on a country lane about twenty miles north of Oxford. But even here, Alex had noticed the high walls and woodland surrounding the estate, and the closed-circuit television cameras rotating discreetly between the trees. The driveway must have been a mile long, emerging from the woods into fields so perfectly mown it was hard to believe they were made of grass. On one side was a lake with two jet skis and a Lapwing wooden sailing boat moored beside a jetty. On the other, partly hidden in a slight dip, a miniature racing circuit twisted and turned, with its own grandstand for spectators. Four of the most beautiful horses Alex had ever seen were grazing in a paddock. The sun was shining. It was as if the summer had returned.

And there was Neverglade. It wasn’t a house but a fourteenth-century castle—with its own moat, battlements, towers and outlying church. It was built of grey stone, with dark green ivy spreading diagonally across the face. Alex caught his breath as they drove towards it and crossed the drawbridge.

The castle didn’t seem real. It was like something out of a picture book. And why had it been built here of all places? He wondered why he had never heard or seen pictures of it before.

Alex wished now that Jack Starbright had decided to come.

She had seemed uneasy and deep in thought in the taxi home from the Waterfront, but it was only later in the evening that she announced her decision.

“I’d love to come with you, Alex,” she said. “And I’d love to watch this rocket being launched. But I can’t. I haven’t seen my mum and dad for nearly a year, and I need to go back home to Washington DC. It’s their wedding anniversary next week, and this would be a good opportunity to take a vacation. You’re safe, and you’re going to be well looked after. Anyway, you’ve got Paul Drevin. He’s your age and you won’t want me hanging around. So go and enjoy yourself. And just you make sure you don’t get into any more trouble.

Rest and recuperation. That’s what the doctor said.”

Nikolei Drevin had sent a uniformed chauffeur to pick Alex up—and this time he had arrived in a Rolls-Royce, a pale blue Corniche with a retracting hood. They had cruised out of London and up the M40, the 6.75 litre V8 engine effortlessly gliding past all the other traffic as if the roads had been built exclusively for its use. Now the car disappeared round the side of the house as Paul Drevin came out to greet him.

The last time Alex had seen the other boy, he had been wearing a dressing gown and pyjamas. Now

he was dressed in jeans and a loose-fitting jersey. He looked a lot healthier than he had in hospital—but there was more to it than that. He was more confident. This was his home, his territory, and one day he would inherit it. Alex had to remind himself that this boy was probably a multimillionaire himself. His weekly pocket money probably arrived in a security van. Suddenly Alex wondered if coming here had been a good idea.

“Quite a place,” he said as they walked towards the front door, their feet crunching on the gravel.

“My father had it built here. The castle used to be somewhere in Scotland. It was falling down so he bought it and shipped it here, piece by piece, and then put it back together again. Come on, I’ll show you your room.”

Alex followed Paul into an entrance hall with flagstones, tapestries and a fireplace big enough to burn a bus. As they climbed up a majestic staircase, they passed paintings by Picasso, Warhol, Hockney and Lucian Freud. Nikolei Drevin obviously liked modern art.

“What you did at the hospital was amazing,” Paul said. “Did you really mean to take my place?”

“Well, it just sort of happened...”

“If those men had kidnapped me, they were going to cut my finger off!” Paul shuddered and Alex wondered how he knew about that. The exact details of what had happened at Hornchurch Towers hadn’t been in the papers. But he assumed that for a man like Drevin, even the most classified information wouldn’t be hard to get. “They nearly killed you because of me,” Paul went on. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s no need to say anything.”

“I’m glad you agreed to come.”

Alex shrugged. “Your dad made it difficult for me to refuse.”

“Yes. He’s like that.” They had reached the top of the stairs. Paul took out an inhaler and puffed at it twice.

“I have asthma,” he explained.

“That’s bad luck.”

“This way...” They walked down a corridor with ornate wooden doors at intervals on either side.

“There are thirty bedrooms,” Paul told him. “I don’t know why we need so many. They’re never full. I’ve put you next to me. If you want anything, just pick up the phone. It’s like living in a hotel, except you don’t have to pay.”

They came to an open door and went into a bedroom with windows looking out over the lake. The chauffeur must have come in through another entrance; Alex’s luggage was on the bed. The room was modern. Alex took in the plasma screen television mounted on the wall, the console with DVD, video and PlayStation, the phone with about a dozen buttons for the different services it provided, a shelf of books—

all brand new by the look of them—the bathroom with bath, power shower and Jacuzzi. Drevin had promised him a luxurious lifestyle and he had certainly been true to his word.

“What do you want to do?” Paul asked.

“You tell me.”

“Well, we can go horse-riding if you like. We’ve got two swimming pools: indoor and out. Later we can watch a film. There’s a cinema and Dad gets all the new releases. We can play tennis or golf, or go clay pigeon shooting. You saw the lake; we can go jet-skiing or sailing or fishing or whatever. I suppose I’d better start by showing you around. That’ll take most of the day, and Dad’s having dinner with us tonight.

It’s up to you.”

Alex didn’t know what to say. “I don’t mind.”

“Well, I’ll show you the house and then we can grab a couple of quad bikes and I’ll take you round the grounds. There are about two hundred acres. Are you hungry?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Right.” Alex tried to sound enthusiastic, but somehow he couldn’t.

Paul had picked up on this. “I guess this must be very weird for you,” he said. “You don’t know me and you probably don’t even like me. Not a lot of people do. They think I’m a rich, spoilt brat and if they come here at all it’s only because of all the free stuff. My father invited you because he wanted to thank you for what you did at the hospital. But it was more than that. He’s hoping we’re going to be friends and it’s the one thing he can’t actually buy. Friendship. But I’ll understand if you want to take your bags and get the hell out of here. Sometimes I feel the same.”

Alex thought for a moment. “No,” he said. “I’m glad to be here. I can’t go back to school and I’m meant to be resting for the next couple of weeks, and to be honest, I’ve got nowhere else to go. So if your dad wants to treat me like a multimillionaire, I’m not going to complain.”

“OK.” Paul looked relieved. “We’re going to New York on Sunday and that’ll be cool. And then there’s Flamingo Bay. Have you tried kite-surfing?”

Alex shook his head.

“I can show you how to do it. We’re on the Atlantic side so we get huge waves.” Paul had suddenly become more animated and Alex found himself warming to him. “Let’s start in the cinema,” he said. “We can work our way down...”

Two hours later, they still hadn’t finished. Alex had seen more wealth than he could possibly imagine. This wasn’t how the other half lived. There were probably only a handful of people in the world with the resources of Nikolei Drevin. Anything he wanted he could have—from the medieval suit of armour outside the dining room to the two Polaris MSX jet skis out on the lake. He had also learnt a little more about Paul’s background. He was an only child. His parents had divorced when he was six and his mother was now living in America. He saw her a couple of times a year, but she and his father never spoke. When Paul was younger he had gone to an ordinary school, but in the end there had been too many security problems and now he was being educated by private tutors. Part of the house had been converted into a school. Alex had seen it and felt sad. There were books and

blackboards, desks and computers. But no schoolchildren. No shouting. No real life.

At five o'clock he went back to his room and dozed for an hour, then showered and changed for dinner. He had seen the grand dining room at Neverglade with its chandeliers and antique oak table long enough to seat twenty—and he was relieved that they would be eating in the conservatory next to the kitchen. This was a pretty room with marble columns, Italian tiles and exotic plants in huge terracotta pots. Nikolei Drevin was already there when he arrived.

“Please come in, Alex. Take a seat.” Drevin was drinking wine. He had changed into jeans and a denim jacket, and Alex couldn't help thinking that the clothes didn't suit him. He was somehow too old for them.

He was a man born to wear a suit.

“Will you have some wine?” Drevin asked. “Or perhaps a beer?”

“Water will be fine,” Alex replied.

“In Russia, children drink alcohol from an early age.”

The door opened and a young woman came in, carrying the first course on a tray: melon and serrano ham.

Alex had no idea how many people worked at Neverglade; the servants had the knack of staying invisible, except when they were needed. He helped himself to iced water. Paul arrived and sat down without speaking. The servant left and the three of them were alone.

“Has Paul shown you around?” Drevin asked.

“Yes. It's quite a place.”

“I bought it when I first came to your country. The original Neverglade was a sixteenth-century manor house. There's a story that Queen Elizabeth I stayed there and saw a production of Twelfth Night in the great hall. But I wasn't fond of the architectural style. The house was too dark, and it only had eleven bedrooms. It was too small.”

“What happened to it?”

Drevin sighed. “A dreadful accident. It burned down. This present castle rose out of the ashes' or rather, I brought it here. I liked it the moment I saw it. The only problem was that it was in Scotland. But happily I was able to do something about that. Have the two of you decided what you're going to do tomorrow?”

“I thought we might go for a walk,” Paul said.

Drevin turned on him and Alex saw something flash in the grey eyes. It was very brief and he couldn't be certain, but it was almost a look of contempt. “Surely you can think of something more adventurous than that!” he said. “Why don't you take the horses out? Or the dirt bikes? Of course, you're both recuperating.

Paul from his appendix operation. And you, Alex”—the eyes came to rest on him—“from your cycling accident.”

“Yes.” Was Drevin questioning his story? “I went over the handlebars and hit a fence.”

“You must have been going very fast.”

“I was, until I hit the fence.”

“Then perhaps dirt bikes aren’t the best idea.” Drevin thought for a moment. His fingers were tugging at his ring but his face gave nothing away. This was a man who was used to keeping his secrets to himself.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said.

“I have a conference call tomorrow morning. With the launch just over a week away, I have to keep in constant contact with my own people as well as NASA and, of course, the British government. But in the afternoon, how would you like to race against me?”

“On horses?”

“Go-karts. You may have seen I have a track here. I built it for Paul, although I’m afraid he seldom uses it.”

“I do use it,” Paul protested. “But it’s no fun when you’ve no one to race against.”

Drevin ignored him. “I have several karts,” he went on. “You’ll find it quite exhilarating, Alex. You against me. What do you say?”

“Sure.” Alex didn’t much like the sound of it but there was something about the way he was being asked.

He’d felt the same when Drevin had invited him to stay. He wasn’t really being given a choice.

“And to make it more fun, why don’t we have a bet? If you beat me, I’ll give you a thousand pounds.”

“I’m not sure I want a thousand pounds,” Alex said. It wasn’t the money that bothered him; he just wasn’t sure he wanted to take it from this man.

“Well, in that case I’ll give it to any charity you care to name. But you don’t need to worry. There is absolutely no chance that you will win. Paul can be the flagman. Shall we say two o’clock?”

“All right.”

Drevin picked up his knife and fork and began to eat. Alex noticed that his son hadn’t touched his food.

Already he could sense the gulf between them. It was obvious with every word that was spoken, every moment that they spent together. Once again he asked himself what he was doing here. And once again he found himself wondering if it had been such a good idea to come.

Two hours later, Alex was making his way back to his room on his own. Nikolei Drevin had gone out into the garden to smoke a cigar. Paul had announced he was tired and had already gone to bed.

He was walking down the main corridor on the ground floor. There was a fully equipped gymnasium and an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool at the far end, and Alex was tempted to go for a swim before bed.

He wasn’t tired any more. He wanted to dive into the warm water and wash away some of the memories of his first day at Neverglade. He was tempted to ring Jack Starbright. She would have

arrived in America by now. He was still sorry she had decided not to come with him, and he was worried he had let her down.

Maybe he should have gone with her.

His path took him past the double doors of Drevin's study. Paul had pointed it out earlier but they hadn't gone in. On an impulse he stopped and looked left and right. The corridor stretched on, empty, in both directions, its black and white tiles giving it the appearance of the world's longest chessboard. He turned the handle. The door opened. Without quite knowing what he was doing, Alex switched on the light and went in.

The study was enormous, dominated by a massive glass and steel desk shaped like a crescent moon. The wood floor was partly covered by a Persian rug that must have taken years to weave. Behind the desk were glass doors leading out onto the front lawn. Alex counted four phones on the desk, as well as two computers, a printer, several piles of documents and a series of clocks showing time zones all over the world. There was one small picture of Paul in a silver frame.

If Alex had hoped that this room would tell him a little more about his host, he was disappointed. Nikolei Drevin was very rich and very powerful—but he didn't need an oversized desk and a stack of expensive equipment to tell him that. One of the walls was covered with photos and Alex went over to them. This was more like it. He had at least found one tiny chink in the man's impressive armour. Vanity. The wall was a gallery of celebrities.

There were photographs of Drevin with pop stars and actors, photographs taken at glitzy parties and de luxe hotels. He showed little emotion in any of them, but even so Alex could tell that he was quietly pleased to be there. Here was Drevin with Tom Cruise, Drevin with Julia Roberts, Drevin chatting to Steven Spielberg on the set of his latest film. He was in Whitehall with the prime minister (who was smiling cheesily) and in Washington with the president of the United States. Here he was shaking hands with the Russian president—Alex was surprised to find himself looking at the bloated face of Boris Kiriyenko. The two of them had met when Alex had been a prisoner on the island of Skeleton Key.

The pope had given Drevin an audience. So had Nelson Mandela in Cape Town. Some of the pictures had been taken from newspapers, and the headlines told the story of his life in bold, simple statements: DREVIN MOVES TO THE UK

DREVIN RICHER THAN THE QUEEN

DREVIN BUILDS £50 MILLION OXFORDSHIRE HOME

DREVIN BUYS STRATFORD EAST

This last headline was accompanied by a photograph of Drevin with Adam Wright, the England striker who had been his first major purchase for his new team. Alex glanced at the other articles.

DREVIN ANNOUNCES ARK ANGEL PLANS

DREVIN BUYS WATERFRONT HOTEL

DREVIN MOVES INTO LONDON PROPERTY MARKET

There was a movement behind him.

Nikolei Drevin had come into the study through the French windows. He was still holding his cigar and was examining Alex curiously. “Alex? What are you doing in here?” There was no anger in his voice. He seemed, if anything, just a little perplexed.

“I’m sorry.” It took Alex a few seconds to find the words. He knew he was trespassing. On the other hand, the door hadn’t been locked. “I was just on my way to bed. I hadn’t been in here and I thought I’d take a look.”

“This is my private study; I would prefer it if you didn’t come in here.”

“Of course. I was about to go but then I saw these pictures.” Alex gestured at one of them. “You’ve met the Queen.”

“Several times, as a matter of fact. She spoke a great deal about her horses. I didn’t find her very interesting.”

“And Nelson Mandela.”

“Ah, yes. A great man. He gave me a signed copy of his book.”

Silence and suspicion hung in the air between them.

“Well, I’d better go up,” Alex said.

“Can you find your way?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Alex smiled. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Alex was feeling dizzy. His left arm was throbbing.

He left the study as casually as he could and didn’t stop until he’d reached his own room on the second floor. He sat down heavily on the bed. He knew what he had just seen. But he couldn’t make sense of it.

The last newspaper cutting had shown Drevin wearing a fluorescent jacket and hard hat, standing outside a derelict building in east London. Alex had recognized it at once and hadn’t needed the banner, stretching out high in the background, to tell him its name.

Hornchurch Towers.

The building that had burnt down. The picture had been taken just a few days before he had almost died there.

Either it was an incredible coincidence or Kaspar and his men—the group that called itself Force Three—

had deliberately taken him to a block of flats that Drevin had just purchased. They had thought he was Paul Drevin. They had been planning to ransom him for the sum of a million pounds. So why had they taken him to a building that his father owned?

Alex undressed and got into bed. He couldn’t sleep. He had thought he was meant to be having two weeks in the lap of luxury. Looked after and safe—that was what Jack had said. He was beginning to

feel that both of them might be wrong.

SHORT CIRCUIT

The building was in SoHo, at the southern end of Manhattan. It stood between a delicatessen and a parking garage in a street full of converted warehouses with metal fire escapes, and boutiques that felt no need to advertise. There were no skyscrapers in this part of New York. SoHo prided itself on its village atmosphere, even if you needed a city salary to afford an apartment here. The entire neighbourhood was relaxed. People walked their dogs or ate their sandwiches in the autumn sun. There was little traffic. It was easy to forget the noise and the chaos just twenty blocks north.

Creative Ideas Animation fitted in perfectly. It sold cartoons: cells from the Simpsons and Futurama, original drawings from Disney and DreamWorks. It only had a small front window and there weren't many pictures on display. Unlike the other galleries in the area, its front door was locked. Visitors had to ring a bell. Even so, people would occasionally wander in off the street, but once they were inside they would find that the girl who worked there was unhelpful, the prices were ridiculous and there were better selections elsewhere. In the twenty years the gallery had been there, nobody had ever bought anything.

Which was precisely the idea. The people who worked at Creative Ideas Animation had no interest at all in art of any sort. They needed a base in New York and this was what they had chosen. SoHo suited them nicely. Nobody noticed who went in or out. Not that it mattered anyway. They owned the garage next door and used a secret entrance round the side.

At six o'clock that evening, five men and two women were sitting round a conference table in a surprisingly spacious and well-appointed room on the first floor just above the gallery. The table was a rectangle of polished glass on a chrome frame. The chairs were also made of chrome, with black leather seats. Clocks showing time zones around the world lined two of the walls. A large plasma screen covered a third. The fourth was a single plate-glass window facing a restaurant on the other side of the street. The glass was one way. Nobody at the restaurant could see in.

All the people in the room were formally dressed in dark suits and crisp white shirts. Six of them were young and fit; they could have just come out of college. The seventh, at the head of the table, was more crumpled. He was a sixty-year-old black man with sunken eyes, grizzled white hair and moustache, and a look of perpetual tiredness.

One of the younger men was speaking.

"I have to report a development in England," he was saying. "It may not be relevant, but as you are aware, six days ago Nikolei Drevin was targeted by the environmental group Force Three. They were planning to abduct his son and hold him to ransom but they captured the wrong kid. It seems this other kid got in the way on purpose. He actually got himself kidnapped. Can you believe that?" He coughed. "What happened next is still unclear, but somehow the kid managed to escape and Drevin decided to reward him by making him part of the family. So now he's on his way over here. He'll be travelling with Drevin and Drevin's son down to Flamingo Bay."

"Does this kid have a name?" someone asked.

“Alex Rider.” It was the older man who had spoken. “I think you should take a look at him.” There was an unmarked file on the table in front of him. He leant forward, flipped it open and took out a photograph. He passed it to the man sitting next to him. “This was sent to me last night,” he explained. “This is the kid we’re talking about. The woman with him is his guardian. He has no parents.” One after another, the four men and two women examined the photo. It showed Alex Rider and Jack Starbright as they entered the Waterfront Hotel, and had been taken by a concealed camera at ground level.

“The fact that Alex Rider has gotten himself involved changes everything,” the older man went on. “I’m surprised Drevin hasn’t checked up on him. It could be his first—and his biggest—mistake.”

One of the women shook her head. “I don’t understand. Who is Alex Rider?”

“He’s no ordinary kid. And let me say straight off that this is to go no further than this room. What I’m telling you is classified—but it seems we’re in a need-to-know situation.” He paused. “Alex is an agent working with MI6 Special Operations.”

A mutter of disbelief travelled round the table.

“But, sir...” the woman protested. “That’s crazy. He can’t be more than fifteen years old.”

“He’s fourteen. And you’re absolutely right. Trust MI6 to come up with an idea like this. But it’s worked.

Alex Rider is the nearest thing the Brits have to a lethal weapon.”

“So how come he’s got himself mixed up with Drevin?” the other woman asked.

The older man smiled to himself as if he knew something they didn’t. In fact, he was only just beginning to work it out. “Maybe it was a coincidence, or maybe it wasn’t,” he murmured. “But either way it’s a whole new ball game. Alex Rider met Kaspar. He’s been at the heart of Force Three. And now he’s close to Drevin.”

“You think he can help us?”

“He’ll help us whether he wants to or not.” The man gazed at the photo and suddenly there was a hardness in his eyes. “If Alex Rider comes to New York, I want to see him. Do you understand? It’s a number one priority. Use any means necessary to get hold of him. I want you to bring that boy to me.”

Over three thousand miles away, at Neverglade, Alex had just finished two sets of tennis with Paul Drevin.

To his surprise, he’d been thrashed.

Paul was a brilliant player. If he’d wanted to, he could have served ace after ace and Alex wouldn’t even have had a chance. He’d purposely slowed down his serve, but despite Alex’s best efforts, the score had been three-six in the first set, four-six in the next. Alex would have happily played on, but Paul shook his head. He had slumped on the grass with a bottle of water. Alex noticed he’d also brought out his inhaler again. At the end of the last set he’d been struggling to breathe.

“You should join a club or something,” Alex remarked, sitting down next to him. “Could you play competitively?”

Paul shook his head. "Two sets is all I can manage. After that my lungs pack in."

"How long have you had asthma?"

"All my life. Luckily it's not too bad, but then it kicks in and that's it. My dad gets really fed up."

"You can't help it if you're ill."

"That's not how he sees it." Paul glanced at his watch. "He'll be at the track by now. Come on. I'll walk over with you."

They left the rackets behind and walked across the lawn together. A man drove past on a tractor and nodded at them. Alex had noticed that none of the staff ever spoke to Paul; he wondered if they were allowed to.

"Aren't you going to race?" he asked.

"Maybe later. If it was just you and me, I wouldn't mind. But Dad..." Paul fell silent as if there was something he didn't want to say. "Dad takes it very seriously," he muttered.

"How fast do these karts go?"

"They can do a hundred miles an hour." Paul saw Alex's eyes widen. "They're not toys, if that's what you were expecting. My father had some business friends to stay a few months ago. One of them lost control round a corner and the kart flipped. They can do that. I saw it happen. He must have turned over six or seven times. He was lucky he was wearing a helmet, otherwise he'd have been killed."

"How badly was he hurt?"

"He broke his wrist and collarbone. His face was all cut up too. And you should have seen the kart! It was a write-off." Paul shook his head. "Be very careful, Alex," he warned. "My dad doesn't like to lose."

"Well, I don't think I've got any chance of winning."

"If you want my advice, you won't even try."

There was a question Alex had been dying to ask him all morning and he decided this was probably the right moment. "Why do you live with him and not with your mother?"

"He insisted."

"Do your parents really hate each other?"

"He never talks about her. And she gets angry if I ask her about him." Paul sighed. "What about your parents?"

"I don't have any. They died when I was small."

"I'm sorry." They walked on for a while in silence. "I wish I had a brother," Paul said suddenly. "That's the worst of it. Always being on my own."

"Can't you go to school?"

"I did for a bit. But it caused all sorts of problems. I had to have a bodyguard—Dad insisted—so I

never really fitted in. In the end he decided it was easier for me to have lessons at home.” Paul shrugged. “I keep thinking that one day I’ll be sixteen and maybe I can walk out of here. Dad’s not so bad, but I wish I could have my own life.”

They had crossed the lawn and there was the track ahead of them: a kilometre of twisting asphalt, with seating for about fifty spectators, and six go-karts waiting in a side bay. Nikolei Drevin was already there, checking one of the engines. There were a couple of mechanics on hand but nobody else. This race was going to happen without an audience.

“Good luck,” Paul whispered.

“Ah—Alex!” Drevin had heard them approaching. He looked up. “Have you done this before?”

“A couple of times.” Alex had been on the indoor track at King’s Cross in London. “I don’t think the karts were as powerful as these.”

“These are the best. I had them custom-built myself. Chrome Molly frames and Rotax Formula E engines; 125cc, electric starter, water-cooled.” He pointed. “You start them by pressing the button next to the steering wheel. I hope you have a head for speed. They’ll go from nought to sixty in 3.8 seconds. That’s faster than a Ferrari.”

“How many circuits do you have in mind?”

“Shall we say three? If you cross the finishing line first, your favourite charity will be richer by a thousand pounds.” Drevin picked up two helmets and handed one to Alex. “I hope this is your size.”

Alex’s helmet was blue; Drevin would be wearing black.

Alex slipped his on and fastened it under his chin. The helmet had a visor that slid down over his face, and protective pads for his neck and the sides of his head.

“This is your last chance, Alex,” Drevin said. “If you’re nervous, now is the time to back out...”

Alex examined the go-karts. They were little more than skeletons, a tangle of wires and pipes with a plastic seat in the middle and two fuel tanks behind. When he sat down, he would be just inches above the ground. And there was something else missing—apart from the floor. He had already noticed that, unlike the karts he had driven at King’s Cross, these had no wrap-around bumpers. Now he understood what Paul had told him. The cars were lethal. The course was hemmed in with bales of straw, but if he lost control, if one of his tyres came into contact with Drevin’s, he could all too easily flip over—just like the friend Paul had mentioned. And if the engine scraped along the asphalt and sparks hit the petrol tanks, the whole thing would explode.

Drevin was waiting for his answer. Looking at him casually holding his helmet, one thumb hooked into his designer jeans, Alex felt a spurt of annoyance. He was going to race this man. And he was going to win.

“I’m not nervous,” he said.

“Good. We’ll do two practice circuits before we start. Paul can signal the first and last circuits with a flag.”

Alex examined the course. It was a series of twists and sharp turns with two straight sections where

he would be able to pick up speed. Part of the track rose steeply on metal legs and then sloped down the other side; it formed a bridge over another section of the track below. Alex realized he would have to slow down as he took it. He would be about six metres up—and although the sides of the bridge were lined by a protective wall of rubber tyres, he didn't like to think what would happen if he lost control and hit them.

After the bridge, there was a long tunnel with the finishing line on the other side.

He climbed into his kart and pressed the ignition button. At once the engine burst into noisy life. Already Alex felt horribly exposed. The kart had no sides, no roof. He was sitting with his knees bent, his feet stretched out in front of him. He pulled a seat belt over his shoulder and attached it. It was too late to back out now. Drevin had started his kart and was moving off smoothly. Alex tested the pedals on either side of the steering column. There were just two. The left foot operated the brake, the right foot the throttle. His kart leapt forward, the engine anxious to blast him onto the track. Drevin was already well ahead. Alex gritted his teeth and pressed his foot down.

Nought to sixty in 3.8 seconds. Alex didn't go as fast as that on the first practice circuit but, even so, the power of the engine took him by surprise. There was no speedometer and being so low it was hard to judge how fast he was really going. He guessed he was doing about forty miles an hour, although it felt a lot faster. The track was a blur. The whole circuit seemed to have contracted as his vision telescoped. He saw the grandstand whip past. The mechanics had stopped what they were doing and were watching his progress. His entire concentration was focused on his hands gripping the wheel. His arms were shuddering. He came to a corner and twisted the wheel right. He felt the tyres slide behind him and almost lost control. He was oversteering. Quickly he corrected himself. The kart entered the raised section and he found himself climbing. Halfway over the bridge, the track cornered sharply to the left. Alex swerved round and the wall of black tyres shimmered past. He had almost hit them. Already he regretted accepting this absurd challenge. He had only just come out of hospital. One mistake at this speed and he would be heading right back.

He completed his first circuit and began another. There was no sign of Drevin, and Alex wondered if he had left the track. Then there was a roar behind him and the Russian overtook, his face hidden beneath the black helmet. He had managed two complete circuits in the time that Alex had done one and a half. There was clearly going to be no contest unless Alex put his foot down. How fast had Paul said the karts could go? A hundred miles an hour. Madness!

And there was Paul, positioned on the grandstand, a chequered flag in his hand. Drevin had slowed down, waiting for Alex to catch up. The race was about to begin. Well, at least Alex had had a chance to test the worst corners and bends. He'd begun to work out his race line. And it occurred to him that he might have one big advantage over Drevin. He weighed a lot less than him. That would give him the edge when it came to speed.

But there was no time for further thought. The flag fell. They were off.

Forty miles an hour—fifty—sixty. Just inches above the blur of the tarmac, Alex pressed his right foot down as far as it would go and felt the burst of power behind him. He quickly caught up with Drevin. They came to a bend. Drevin took it tight, hugging the inside. Alex shot round the outside and suddenly he was in the lead as he screamed through the tunnel. So he was right: his weight would make the vital difference. Now all he had to do was stay ahead for the next two laps and he would

win.

He had just begun the second circuit when his kart shuddered. For a moment, Alex thought the engine had misfired. Then it happened again, harder this time. He felt himself being jerked back in his seat and the bones in his neck rattled. The tyres slewed and he had to fight for control. A third knock. At this speed it felt as if he had been hit by a sledgehammer. He glanced back and realized what was happening. Drevin was bumping him from behind. He was being quite methodical about it; he wasn't trying to overtake. They were doing seventy miles an hour, suspended in the middle of a bare steel frame that offered no protection at all. Did Drevin want to kill them both?

Alex braked and immediately Drevin soared ahead, shooting up the raised section of the track, Alex followed, looking for an opportunity to slip past him. But Drevin was cheating again, zigzag-ing left and right, refusing to give him any space. They roared down the slope and onto the straight, then plunged into the tunnel. After the bright sun-light, it was very dark inside. Alex accelerated and drew level with Drevin.

Drevin twisted his wheel and crashed sideways into Alex.

The whole world leapt. Sparks exploded in the darkness as metal tore into metal. The walls of the tunnel rushed past. Desperately Alex fought for control, and as the two karts burst out into day-light, he dropped back. Once again Drevin had the lead.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alex saw Paul wave the flag, signalling the third and final circuit. The race seemed to have lasted only seconds—and it looked as if Drevin had it in the bag. Alex thought about letting him go. What did it matter who won? After all, this was Drevin's toy. Drevin was paying the bills. It might be polite to lose.

But something inside him rebelled against the idea. He stamped down, urging his kart on. Once more he drew level with his opponent. Now the two karts were side by side, heading up the ramp for the last time.

Alex saw Drevin glance across and then wrench at his steering wheel. Alex understood at once what he was doing: Drevin was trying to knock him into the tyres and over the edge! For a horrible moment, Alex saw himself somersaulting sideways in his kart. He saw the world turning upside down and heard the grinding of metal as he hit the tarmac below. Would Drevin really kill him just to win a race? His nerves screamed at him. Stop now! This was stupid. He had nothing to prove.

Drevin slammed into him again. That was it. There was no way Alex was going to let the Russian billionaire win. He touched the brake, as if accepting defeat. Drevin shot ahead, swerving round the corner.

Then Alex accelerated. But he didn't turn the wheel. Instead he aimed straight for the wall of tyres. He hit them head-on and, yelling out loud, soared into the air. For a brief moment he hung in space. Black tyres cascaded all around him, spinning away like oversized coins. Then he was falling. The tarmac rushed up to greet him. There was a bone-shuddering crash as he hit the track below, and Alex was slammed into his seat. The steering wheel twisted in his hands, trying to pull away as he struggled for control. Somehow the kart kept going. Tyres bounced all around and he was forced to swerve wildly. But he had done it. He had cut the corner and now he was ten metres ahead of Drevin.

The tunnel loomed in front of him. He roared into the darkness and out the other side, across the

finishing line. He slammed on his brakes. Too hard. The kart slewed round in an uncontrollable spin and stopped.

The engine stalled. But the race was over.

Alex had won.

A few seconds later, Drevin pulled up next to him. He tore off his helmet. He was sweating heavily; his hair was plastered to his scalp. He was furious.

“You cheated!” he exclaimed. “You missed part of the track.”

“You pushed me,” Alex protested. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“We will race again!”

“No thanks.” Alex had removed his helmet, glad to feel the breeze on his face. “It was a lot of fun but I think I’ve had enough.” He climbed out of the kart. The mechanics were hovering beside the track, wondering if they should approach.

Paul arrived, still carrying the flag. “I can’t believe what I just saw! That was amazing, Alex. But you could have been killed!”

“The race is void,” Drevin said. “I did not lose!”

“Well, you didn’t win either,” Alex muttered.

Paul stood there helplessly, looking from one to the other. Drevin considered for a moment, then shook his head slowly. “It was a draw,” he muttered. Then he turned and walked away.

Alex watched him go. “I see what you mean,” he murmured. “He really doesn’t like losing.”

Paul turned to Alex, his expression serious. “You should be careful, Alex,” he warned. “Don’t make him your enemy.” He ran after his father.

Alex was left standing alone.

INJURY TIME

By Saturday the race seemed to have been forgotten. Nikolei Drevin was in a good mood as he waited for another of his Rolls-Royces—this one a silver Phantom—to be brought round to the front door. It was an important day for him. Stratford East, the team he had bought for twenty million pounds, were playing Chelsea in the Premiership and, although they had been comprehensively beaten three-nil by Newcastle only the week before, Drevin was in high spirits.

“Have you always supported Chelsea?” he asked Alex as they left the house.

“Yes.” It was true. Alex lived only twenty minutes from Stamford Bridge and he had often gone to games with his uncle.

“The club was almost bankrupt when it was bought by Roman Abramovich.” Drevin looked thoughtful. “I met him a few times in Moscow. We did not get on. I hope to disappoint both of you today.”

Alex said nothing. There was an intensity in Drevin’s voice that suggested that, as far as he was concerned, this was more than a game. The Rolls-Royce pulled up and the two of them got in.

Paul Drevin wasn’t coming. He’d had a bad asthma attack the night before and his doctor, who was based twenty-four hours a day at Neverglade, had said he needed a day’s rest. And so Alex found himself alone with Drevin in the back of the car as they were driven down the motorway to London.

“You have no parents,” Drevin said suddenly.

“No. They both died when I was very young.”

“I’m sorry. An accident?”

“A plane crash.” It was easy for Alex to repeat the lie that MI6 had been telling him all his life.

“You have no relations?”

“No. Just Jack. She looks after me.”

“That is very unusual. But then it seems to me that you are an unusual boy. It would be interesting, I think, to have a son like you.” Drevin looked out of the window. “How are you getting on with Paul?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“He likes you.” Drevin was still looking away, avoiding Alex’s eye. “I wish that he was a little more like you. He seems so ... aimless.”

“Maybe he’d be happier if you let him go to an ordinary school,” Alex said.

“That is not possible.”

“Do you really think he’s in any danger?”

“He is my son.” Drevin spoke the words with no emotion at all. He had summed Paul up. There was nothing else to say. He forced a thin smile to his lips. “But enough of that,” he went on. “My team will beat your team. That is all that matters today.”

An hour later, they turned onto the Fulham Road and were forced to drive at a snail’s pace through the thousands of people who were arriving for the game, the Chelsea fans in blue, the Stratford East supporters in red and black. Alex was glad that Drevin’s Rolls-Royce had tinted windows. Nobody could look in. He had come to Stamford Bridge a hundred times on foot and he’d always loved the sense of belonging, that moment when he became part of the crowd battling its way through rain or snow in the hope of seeing a home win. This was too comfortable, too isolated. He would have felt embarrassed if anyone had seen him.

They turned into the complex of hotels, restaurants and health clubs that had come to be known as Chelsea Village, then swept away from the fans, following a narrow passageway to the west stand. The car stopped in front of a revolving door with the words MILLENNIUM RECEPTION in silver above. They got out.

Drevin had become more tense the closer they got to London. His eyes and mouth were three narrow slits and he was twisting his ring in short, jerky movements.

“Here is Miss Knight,” he said, and Alex saw Tamara Knight, the over-efficient personal secretary he had met at the Waterfront Hotel. She was still dressed smartly in a jacket and shirt, even though she was at a football match. Alex noticed she was wearing black and red earrings: at least she hadn’t completely forgotten her team colours.

“Good afternoon, Mr Drevin. Alex...” She nodded at both of them. “Lunch is being served on the third floor. I have your passes.” She gave them two security passes marked ALL ACCESS + T.

“What does the T stand for?” Alex asked.

“I presume it means you can go through the tunnel,” Tamara explained. She sounded uninterested. “In fact you can go anywhere you like, except onto the pitch.” She turned to Mr Drevin. “Good luck this afternoon,” she said.

“Thank you, Miss Knight.”

They went into what could have been the foyer of a very smart health club, with a dark wooden desk, a turnstile and a wide corridor with two oversized lifts. A uniformed security guard and a receptionist watched them as Tamara called the lift. They travelled up to the third floor in silence.

Alex realized that he was entering hallowed ground. This was where the directors, chairmen, managers and corporate sponsors came. Normally he wouldn’t have been allowed anywhere near.

Yet still he felt ill at ease. Drevin might have forgotten the kart race but he hadn’t. It seemed to Alex that the more he learnt about him, the less attractive he became. An absolutely wonderful man. That was how Crawley had described him. Well, MI6 had said much the same about Damian Cray. Alex knew that Drevin was a bad loser, and he had dark feelings about this match which he couldn’t shake off.

“How are you enjoying your stay with Mr Drevin?” Tamara asked suddenly.

“It’s fine.”

“I hope you’re keeping out of trouble.”

Was she trying to tell him something? Alex examined the attractive blue eyes, but they were giving nothing away.

The lift doors opened and they walked out into a corridor lined with dark wooden panels, and into a dining room with a buffet table on one side. Waitresses were circulating with champagne. Unlike the rest of the complex, the room was old-fashioned with a moulded ceiling and a series of ornate, smoked glass windows. But for the two widescreen televisions mounted on the walls, it could have belonged to the nineteenth century.

Drevin accepted a glass of champagne and sat down at one of the tables where about half a dozen people, including the Stratford East chairman and a couple of the footballers’ wives, were already seated. There were about fifty people in the room.

Alex recognized a couple of television actors chatting to the Chelsea chairman, who—unlike Drevin —

looked completely at ease. A waitress gave Alex a glass of lemonade, and he sipped it in silence.

He found himself standing beside Tamara Knight. “Are you a football supporter?” he asked.

“No.” She looked bored. “I’ve never really understood the British obsession with football. Of course, I want Mr Drevin to win. But otherwise I don’t really care.”

Alex found himself getting annoyed. Tamara looked like a model or an actress. But she seemed determined to act like a cold-blooded businesswoman. “How did you come to work for Mr Drevin?” he asked.

“Oh, an agency recommended me.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Of course I do. Mr Drevin is a very interesting man.” She was unwilling to say any more and looked relieved when the door suddenly opened and a young woman came striding in. Alex took in the blonde hair, the permanent tan, the diamond collar necklace and the perfect teeth. He recognized her instantly. Her face was rarely absent from the tabloids or the television screen.

Her name was Cayenne James and she had once been a model and an actress. Then she had married Adam Wright, one of the country’s most famous strikers and a member of the England squad. Wright had made the headlines himself when Drevin had paid twenty-four million pounds to buy him from Manchester United; he was now the captain of Stratford East. Alex wasn’t surprised that his wife had turned up to see him play.

He watched as she went over to Drevin and kissed the air close to his cheeks, then sat down and helped herself to champagne. The conversation in the room had quietened when she came in and Alex was able to hear their first exchange.

“How are you, Niki?” She had a loud, school-girlish, voice. “Sorry I’m late. I just popped into Harrods. It’s only down the road.”

“Was your husband with you?”

“No! Don’t worry!” She giggled. “Adam’s been concentrating on the big match. He never comes shopping when there’s a game coming up...”

More food was served. Alex was feeling increasingly out of place. He was sorry Paul hadn’t been able to come. It was half past two. He wished the game would begin.

Half an hour later it did. The smoked glass windows and doors were opened and everyone walked out.

Alex went with them, emerging onto a stand with about a hundred seats, one tier up, exactly opposite the tunnel. And at that moment he was able to forget Drevin, Neverglade, gokarting and all the rest of it. The magic of the stadium, moments before kick-off, overwhelmed him.

Stamford Bridge has room for over forty-two thousand spectators and today, in the bright afternoon sunlight, every seat was full. Music was pounding out of the speakers, fighting with the fans, who were already chanting good-humouredly. Alex watched as a Mexican wave travelled in a huge circle in front of him. He had been given seat A10, perfectly placed between the two goals. There were no policemen in sight. Chelsea has its own army of stewards but it didn’t look as if anyone was in the mood for trouble.

Then there was a roar as the teams emerged and formed two lines, each one accompanied by a small child.

The referee and the two linesmen joined them.

“You’re next to me,” Tamara Knight announced.

Alex sat down. He was determined to enjoy the next hour and a half.

But it was obvious, almost from kick-off, that it was going to be a hard, unfriendly game. After just ten minutes, one of the Chelsea players was brought down by a vicious tackle that immediately earned Stratford East a yellow card. It was to be the first of many. Chelsea dominated the first half, and but for the hard work of the Stratford East keeper, they would have soon taken the lead. Then, half an hour in, the right winger gathered the ball and sent it in a perfect cross to the penalty area and a second later it had been headed into the goal. The crowd roared; the speakers blared. It was one-nil to the home side, and just five minutes later the Chelsea captain beat two defenders and powered the ball into the back of the net.

Stratford East went into the break two goals down.

There were more drinks served in the dining room during the interval but Alex was careful to avoid Nikolei Drevin. He remembered how he’d behaved at the end of the kart race. This was a thousand times more humiliating. The game was being shown all over the country. Drevin had spent a sizeable fortune building up his team. And the fact that he was being beaten by Chelsea—owned by another Russian—

somehow made it all the worse.

Cayenne James didn’t help. “Never mind, Niki,” she said in her silly, high-pitched voice. “It’s not over yet.

I'm sure Adam will be talking to the boys in the dressing room."

"It would be nice if your husband were to touch the ball," Drevin replied. He had a glass of champagne but was holding it as though it were poison.

"He does seem a bit tired today. Maybe he's saving his strength for the second half."

In fact, Adam Wright was barely visible when the game began again, and Alex wondered why the manager didn't pull him off. He was playing in the centre but never seemed to be anywhere near the ball, and when he did take possession he didn't create a single opportunity. Alex knew that the Stratford East captain had been given a bad ride by the press. He should never have left Manchester United. He spent more time modelling clothes and advertising aftershave than playing football. His last outings for England had been dismal. Half the country had turned against him, and perhaps it was now affecting his game.

The next goal, when it came, was more of a fluke than anything else. There was an untidy scrabble in front of the Chelsea goal and for a moment the ball was invisible. Then a Stratford East player got his foot to it.

The ball deflected off another player's thigh and sailed past inches away from the Chelsea keeper's outstretched fingers. It wasn't pretty but it made the score two-one with fifteen minutes left to play.

After that, Chelsea rarely lost control of the ball. Alex found himself willing them on, hoping they would keep their lead until the final whistle. He knew it was ungenerous of him; he was here as Drevin's guest.

But Chelsea were the better team and he'd been a blue all his life. He kept his emotions to himself, though, resisting the temptation to join the home supporters as they urged their team on.

Full time. It seemed that Chelsea had it in the bag. But then, out of nowhere, three minutes into injury time, came the chance to equalize: a foul inside the Chelsea penalty area. One of the Stratford East players went down, gripping his leg in agony, and although Alex suspected he was faking, the referee believed him.

There was a blast of the whistle. Another yellow card. A roar of disbelief from the crowd. But Stratford East had been awarded the penalty. It had to be the last shot of the game.

Adam Wright stepped forward to take it.

He couldn't miss. He had taken penalties for England countless times. Alex had watched him perform brilliantly against Portugal in the last European Championships, firing the ball into the net with breathtaking ease. Surely he would do the same now.

A peculiar hush had descended on the stadium. After making so much noise, it was astonishing that over forty-two thousand people could be so quiet. Alex glanced at Drevin sitting four seats away. The man's entire body was tense but there was something close to a smile on his face. He knew there was no way Stratford East could win this game. But a draw would be enough. There was no humiliation in a draw.

Adam Wright settled the ball on the penalty spot.

The other Stratford East players were ranged behind him. The Chelsea keeper was crouching, rubbing his hands together. The moment seemed to stretch out to an eternity. The crowd held its collective breath.

Adam Wright ran his hands through his hair. It was long this season, with blond highlights. The referee blew his whistle. A single, short blast. Wright ran forward almost lazily and kicked.

Alex watched in disbelief.

Something had gone terribly wrong. The keeper had been misdirected and had dived to the left, but the ball hadn't gone anywhere near the goal. A clump of grass and mud sailed in one direction while the ball soared in the other, passing at least a yard over the crossbar. Adam Wright realized what had happened and, even at this distance, Alex thought he could see the shock in his eyes. Then, slowly, everything seemed to unfreeze. The keeper got to his feet, punching the air with both fists. The other Stratford East players stood where they were, stunned. The Chelsea fans roared their pleasure; the visiting supporters sat in paralysed silence.

And Drevin? He had gone very pale. His hands were clasped together, his eyes empty.

A few seats away from him, Cayenne James giggled nervously. "Oh dear!" she squealed.

Drevin turned to look at her and Alex could see that he made no attempt to disguise the contempt in his face.

And then it was all over. The referee didn't even bother with another kick-off. He blew the final whistle and the two teams came together, shaking hands and swapping shirts. More music pounded out as the screens flashed up the final score. Two-one to Chelsea. The stewards reappeared and the crowd started to trickle out of the stadium.

Drevin was suddenly very much alone. As Alex watched, he dug a hand into his trouser pocket and took out a mobile phone. He pressed a speed dial button and spoke briefly. Alex got the feeling that he was talking in Russian, but even if it had been English, he wouldn't have been able to hear above the general din. Drevin's face was colourless. Whatever he was saying, Alex doubted he was sending his team a congratulatory message.

Drevin put his phone away and stood up. He seemed to notice Alex for the first time.

"I'm sorry," Alex muttered. He didn't know what to say.

"There will be other games." Drevin's voice was heavy. "If you don't mind, Alex, I will ask Miss Knight to accompany you home. The driver is waiting outside. I have some business to attend to."

Tamara nodded. "Whatever you say, Mr Drevin."

Drevin went back into the dining room. Alex took one last look at the stadium, at the great rectangle of bright green grass, at the departing spectators. He knew it was unlikely he would ever have this view of Stamford Bridge again.

Something caught his eye.

The sun glinting off something. Somebody in the crowd.

No. It wasn't possible.

Alex looked again, then hurried down the steps to the edge of the terrace and looked more carefully, his eyes searching the milling crowd. He knew what he had seen. He just hoped he was mistaken.

He wasn't.

Silver Tooth was standing on the edge of the pitch. Alex looked down, shocked. The man he'd knocked out with the defibrillator and who had been there with Force Three when he was interrogated was there, in the crowd! He had been watching the game as if that was what he did on a Saturday afternoon when he wasn't kidnapping people. Alex watched as he slipped something into his jacket pocket and then began moving slowly towards the south stand.

Tamara Knight called out to him. "Alex?"

What should he do? Alex didn't want any more involvement with Force Three. He was meant to be on holiday, recuperating. But he couldn't just let the man walk away.

He made his decision. He turned and ran past her. "I'll meet you at the car!" he called out.

And then he was gone, through the glass doors into the dining room, searching for the way back down.

BLUE MURDER

Force Three were here at Stamford Bridge.

As Alex burst out into the open air, he knew they hadn't come to watch a football match. They had already attacked Drevin once—through his son. Was it possible they were going to try again, this time by targeting his football team?

Alex reached the edge of the pitch and looked around. The crowd was slowly disappearing through the various exits, like sand trickling out of a leaking bucket, but there must still have been at least ten thousand people in the stadium. Now that he was at ground level, he wondered if he would have any chance of spotting the man he knew only as Silver Tooth again.

Up on the giant television screens, Adam Wright was being interviewed about the missed penalty. The Stratford East captain had a boyish face; he could have been about nineteen. He looked and sounded as if he was sulking.

“...so I don't really know what happened,” he was saying. “I thought the ball moved just before I kicked it.

The soil was a bit soft around the penalty spot. I don't know. It's just one of those things, I suppose. There's always next time...”

Alex glanced away from the image and that was when he saw him. Silver Tooth was wearing an orange Gore-Tex jacket. Perhaps he thought it was going to rain. There was a large gap between the terraces and the pitch, and Alex saw Silver Tooth as he separated from the crowd. He was walking purposefully round the front of the south stand, not making for any of the exits. Alex was able to examine him properly for the first time. He was in his twenties. Not English. His looks were Middle Eastern. His hair was long and dirty.

It wasn't just his teeth that needed attention. Alex followed him behind the goal and towards the players'

tunnel. What was the man doing here? He turned the question over and over in his mind.

Silver Tooth reached the tunnel and disappeared from sight. Alex quickened his pace, grateful for the security pass around his neck. A couple of stewards glanced his way but neither of them tried to stop him.

It occurred to him that Silver Tooth must have a pass too. If so, how had he got it? Or was his simply forged?

He reached the tunnel, which was surrounded by a sea of empty blue seats with the press box just above.

Nine steps led down to an old-fashioned metal and wire gate. In normal circumstances Alex would have given anything to be here. He had watched his team emerge countless times from right where he was standing. He could picture the spectators in their thousands, hear the chanting and clapping

swelling into a roar of excitement as the players appeared. This really was the lion's mouth. But he couldn't feel any excitement. Despite all his resolutions, Alex knew that he was getting into trouble once again. Trouble, it seemed, just wouldn't let him go.

Alex entered a modern, surprisingly empty area with a ceiling so low it was oppressive, and grey tiles on the floor. There was no sign of Silver Tooth. There were a couple of gleaming silver bins and a bench where injured players could receive immediate physio. The air was cold and sterile, endlessly recycled by a powerful air-conditioning system. Everything smelled brand new, and Alex recalled that the owner of Chelsea had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds smartening the place up. He pushed open a door and found himself looking into the press room, a rectangular space with about twenty seats facing a narrow platform. The journalists had already left. There was an outer room with two walls covered in carefully placed advertisements and he recognized the spot where Adam Wright had been interviewed only a few minutes before.

He tried another door. As he pushed it ajar, he heard voices coming from inside. One was all too familiar.

He held the door open a crack and looked through. Yes. Combat Jacket was there. The last time Alex had seen him, he had been shooting at him with an FP9 single-action pistol, blocking his escape from a blazing building. Now he was standing with his back to the door, hands on hips. Silver Tooth and Spectacles were with him. They were surrounding a fourth man who was sitting on a bench, a towel wrapped around his waist.

It was Adam Wright. This was the visiting team's changing room. Peering through the narrow crack—Alex didn't dare open the door any wider—he took in the blue padded benches, the lockers, the vending machine filled with water and Lucozade, the ultra-modern showers and toilets on the far side. The ceiling was low here too. Alex could almost feel the weight of the seating in the stand directly overhead.

The Stratford East captain was the only player in the room. The others must have left while he was being interviewed, getting out as fast as they could after losing the game. Adam Wright was looking up at the three men towering over him. He was clearly surprised to see them.

"If you guys don't mind," he said, "I was just going to take a shower. We don't usually have visitors in the players' changing room."

"We represent the Stratford East Supporters' Club," Combat Jacket said. "And we have something for you."

"A thank-you present," Spectacles added.

"That's right. To thank you for everything you've done for the team." Combat Jacket took a sealed plastic box from his pocket and held it out.

Adam Wright took it. "Well, that's very kind of you guys. But if you don't mind, I'll open it later."

"We'd prefer you to open it now."

Alex was only a few metres away from the Stratford East captain, who was sitting facing him. He watched as the player opened the box and took out a gold medallion on a chain. It was an appropriate present.

Adam Wright wore more jewellery than most women: earrings, bracelets and a different necklace every day of the week. But none of this made any sense. The three men in the dressing room were killers. What were they doing offering gifts to a footballer who'd just blown a game?

"It's really nice," the Stratford East captain said, holding up the medallion. It was round and chunky, about the size of a mini disc. There was a figure engraved on the front. Himself, heading a ball into a net. "It's great!" he exclaimed. "Can you tell the fans that, you know, I really appreciate this."

"Aren't you going to put it on?" Combat Jacket asked.

"Sure!" Wright slipped it over his head. The medallion rested on his muscular chest. "It's quite light. What's it made of?"

"Caesium," Combat Jacket said.

Adam Wright looked blank. "Is that rare?" he asked.

"Oh yes. Getting hold of it can be murder..."

Something nudged the back of Alex's neck. Alex stepped backwards, allowing the door of the changing room to close, and he heard no more of the conversation.

There is something about the touch of a gun that is unmistakable. It's not just the coldness of the metal; it's the whisper of death that comes with it. Very slowly, Alex turned round. He saw the gun clasped in two hands, one of them swathed in bandages. He knew that the man who held it had broken at least a couple of his fingers. Alex remembered him from the magnetic resonance imaging chamber at St Dominic's. He was short and very well built. Alex had nicknamed him Steel Watch, but the watch was no longer there. It must have been broken when the man crashed into the MRI machine. Alex was a little surprised that the same thing hadn't happened to his neck.

"You!" Steel Watch was shocked to see Alex.

Alex raised his hands. "I don't suppose you've got the time?" he asked.

Steel Watch grimaced. He seemed unsure what to do. He had been about to enter the changing room; the other members of Force Three were waiting for him. But he had a personal score to settle with Alex.

He made up his mind. "You and I are going to leave quietly together," he ordered. "I am going to walk behind you. The gun will never be more than a few inches away. You will not speak; you will not stop. If you try anything—anything—I will put a bullet in your spine. Do you understand?"

"Where are we going?"

"There's a van. I'll show you. Now move."

Alex had no choice. He could see that Steel Watch meant exactly what he said. He was going to force him out of the stadium and make him a prisoner for a second time. Alex knew if he got in the van, he'd be dead anyway. Both Combat Jacket and Steel Watch had a score to settle with him. They were adults. Professional killers. He was a child. But he had beaten them twice. They were going to enjoy making him pay.

Steel Watch gestured with his gun and Alex walked down a corridor leading away from the tunnel. He had noticed that the man was wearing a security pass just like his. It had to be fake. There was nobody around, but even if one of the stewards did appear, there would be nothing Alex could do. If he called for help, Steel Watch would kill him and then run. There were still hundreds of people milling around Stamford Bridge; it would be simple to disappear into the crowd.

Briefly Alex thought about Adam Wright and wondered what was going on inside the changing room. But there was nothing he could do for the footballer. He was more worried about himself.

They left the building. The east stand was now behind them, the terraces slanting up at an angle from the ground. There was a high wall straight ahead. Alex knew that the railway ran behind it -the wall had been built to keep out the noise. On the other side of the tracks was a cemetery. Alex had been there when his uncle, Ian Rider, was buried. He had to think. If he didn't do something soon, he might well end up joining him.

Steel Watch jabbed the gun into the small of his back, deliberately hurting him. He had seen a couple of policemen standing on the other side of the gates that led into the Fulham Road. There was an endless queue of people filtering slowly out of the gates. The bars, restaurants and hotels were open. Alex paused.

He couldn't believe they were about to walk through the middle of it all.

Steel Watch sensed his hesitation. "We are going to start walking now," he hissed. "Remember. The gun is out of sight. There'll be one shot and nobody will know where it came from. You'll be lying in the gutter and I'll be gone. Head out of the gates and across the road. I will tell you where to go after that."

Alex began to walk with the wall on his left. He turned the corner and saw the ticket booths and souvenir shop just ahead. The Stratford East fans seemed to have gone, taking their disappointment with them. But the Chelsea supporters were in no hurry. It was a mild evening and this was the place to be, meeting friends, savouring the victory. Alex knew that his situation would get worse with every step he took. Right here, now, there might be something he could do. There were the two policemen, chatting together, unaware that anything was wrong. There would be dozens more on the Fulham Road. But once Alex moved away from the crowds, he would be totally exposed. Steel Watch had mentioned a van. Alex imagined the steel door slamming shut behind him. At that moment he would be as good as dead.

He had to do something now, before it was too late. He glanced over his shoulder. Steel Watch was being careful, keeping a safe distance between them. The man had his hands tucked under his jacket. It didn't even look as if the two of them were together, but Alex knew that the gun was trained on him. If he tried anything, Steel Watch would fire through the fabric. He couldn't speak; he couldn't turn. He had to keep moving.

The gates were getting closer. The Fulham Road was beyond. One of the policemen was giving somebody directions. But they weren't going to help him. What about the crowd? Ahead of him, next to the exit, he caught a glimpse of red and black. Two Stratford East supporters in team shirts. One of them was a skinhead with small, red eyes and a ruddy, pock-marked face. He was scowling at the departing Chelsea fans and Alex could see that he would love to cause trouble. He was swaying on

his feet. He'd probably been drinking. But there were too many policemen around. All he had was attitude—and he was showing as much of it as he could.

Alex was heading straight towards him with Steel Watch close behind. And suddenly he had a thought.

Steel Watch was keeping an eye on his every movement. But he couldn't see his face. He couldn't see what he did with his hands.

But the Stratford East supporter could.

Alex slowed down.

“Keep moving,” Steel Watch ordered in a low, ugly voice.

Alex stared at the skinhead. He had once read somewhere that if you stared at another person hard enough, they'd become aware of you. He had tried it often enough when he was bored in class. Now he focused all his attention on the man even as he continued walking forward, weaving through the crowd.

The man looked up. It wasn't telepathy; there was no real way he could avoid him. Alex was about fifteen metres away, getting closer all the time. People were crossing in front of him—fathers with their sons, couples, fans dressed in the blue Chelsea strip—but Alex ignored them. His eyes drilled into the Stratford East supporter.

The skinhead noticed him. His own eyes narrowed.

Alex's hand was against his chest. With his gaze still fixed on the man, he raised two fingers slowly and deliberately, then dropped one of them. Unseen by Steel Watch, he had signalled the score: two-one. And he had left his middle finger standing offensively upright. Alex sneered at the supporter, trying to look as aggressive as he could. The supporter stared. Alex repeated the sign. This was the worst insult he could throw at the man without opening his mouth.

Alex had been right. The Stratford East supporter was drunk. He had watched his team lose with almost as much disgust as Drevin himself, and the botched penalty in the final seconds had enraged him. And here was some cocky little sod, a Chelsea supporter, making fun of him! Well, to hell with the police. To hell with the crowd. He wasn't going to stand here and take it. He was going to sort him out.

He lumbered forward. Alex felt a spurt of excitement as he saw that his tactic had worked. Behind him, Steel Watch hadn't realized what was going on. Things had to happen very quickly; Alex needed the element of surprise.

The Stratford East supporter stopped in front of him, blocking his path. “What's your problem?” he demanded.

Alex came to a halt—he had no choice—and he felt Steel Watch bump into him. There was no longer any distance between them.

“I said—what's your problem?”

Alex said nothing. He had been instructed not to talk. Instead he twisted his face into a sneer of amusement, mocking the man who stood in front of him.

It worked. The supporter swore at him and lashed out with his right fist. Alex ducked. The fist flew past his head and slammed into the throat of Steel Watch, who had been standing right behind him. The gun went off. The bullet hit the Stratford East supporter in the arm, spinning him round. Panic erupted. Suddenly everyone was screaming and running, aware that somebody had been shot but not knowing who had fired.

The two policemen charged in through the gates. Behind them a third policeman appeared on horseback.

The horse whinnied and began to push through the scattering crowd.

The Stratford East supporter was sitting on the ground, clasping his injured arm. Alex felt sorry for him, but he wasn't going to hang around. The instant the gun had been fired, he had darted away, diving into the crowd, weaving left and right, hoping Steel Watch wouldn't have a chance to shoot again.

He had timed it perfectly. Steel Watch didn't dare try another shot. There were already too many people between him and Alex. And he couldn't bring out the gun without drawing attention to himself. There were police everywhere. There was nothing more he could do.

Alex ran on, past the Chelsea shop and on towards the entrance where the car had dropped him before the match. Tamara Knight was standing there. She was looking alarmed, and Alex wondered if she had heard the shot. Then he realized she was staring at him. She could tell from his face that something was wrong.

“Alex? What is it?” she demanded.

“Get help!” he exclaimed. “Call the police. Whatever.” He took a deep breath. “You've got to send someone to the changing rooms. Adam Wright. I think he's in trouble.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Force Three.” It was too complicated to explain. Drevin's personal assistant was looking at him as if he were deranged. Where was he meant to begin? “Just trust me,” he begged. “You need to get security over to the changing rooms. Please! Believe me...”

Tamara gazed at him for a few more seconds, summing him up. She didn't look as if she believed him. But then she nodded. “All right, then. There's a steward inside.” She turned and hurried back into the west stand.

But it was already too late.

The three men had left the changing room. Adam Wright was on his own. He fingered the new medallion they had given him. He had more than a dozen of them—in gold and platinum. He'd always liked medallions, even when he was a boy growing up in Essex. He thought they suited him.

It was strange, though. Receiving a gift after a game like that. Adam Wright thought about the missed penalty as he went over to the showers. However you looked at it, he wasn't having a good season.

Maybe it was time to think about another transfer. He had to be careful. If his game began to slip, he might lose some of his advertising and sponsorship deals. And if that happened, how would he pay for his next Ferrari?

He dropped his towel. Glimpsing himself in a mirror, he smiled. He had a perfect body and he liked the way the new medallion lay against his chest. He was looking forward to showing it to Cayenne.

He turned the shower on full. Hot water blasted down. He stepped into the spray and water battered his neck and shoulders. He turned round.

The men who had given Adam Wright the medallion had told him that it was made of caesium. What they hadn't told him was that caesium is an alkali metal found in group one of the periodic table. It does not occur naturally. It has only one electron in its outer shell. And, like all alkali metals, it reacts extremely violently when exposed to water. The medallion had been given a coating of wax to protect it from the atmosphere, but the wax was now melting in the shower.

Adam Wright knew there was something wrong when he felt an intense burning. For a moment, he thought the water was too hot. Then he looked down and, to his astonishment, he saw a brilliant flame bursting out in front of him. He opened his mouth to scream, and at that moment the caesium medallion exploded. The scream died in his throat. With the water rushing down, he fell to his knees, his hands outstretched, and for a brief instant he looked just like a keeper seconds after he has let the ball into the back of the net. Then he pitched forward and lay still.

Two minutes later, the door of the changing room crashed open and a group of security men rushed in. There was nothing they could do. Adam Wright was lying on the floor with water all around him. Smoke was rising up beneath his chest, creeping through his armpits.

The Stratford East captain and England striker had taken his last penalty.

And the people who had come for him hadn't missed.

EXPIRY DATE

The following day, Alex was playing table tennis with Paul Drevin. Once again Paul was beating him. The score was fifteen-eighteen and it was his serve. He fired the ball down the table, trying to put some spin on it. Paul lobbed it back. Alex went for the slam and got it. The ball hit the corner of the table and bounced over Paul's bat. Sixteen-eighteen. He was in with a chance.

The two boys were playing in the most extraordinary room Alex had ever been in. It was more than sixty metres long but only six metres wide, an oversized cigar tube with porthole windows running along the whole length. Part of the room was carpeted, with luxurious leather chairs arranged around a coffee table, a drinks cabinet and a widescreen TV. Then there was the games area: complete with table-tennis table, snooker table, PlayStation and gym. Next to it was a small but well-equipped kitchen and, on the other side, closed off, a study area with a library and conference table where Nikolei Drevin was now working.

And the whole thing was thirty-six thousand feet above the ground.

Alex and Paul were on their way to America, flying in Drevin's private 747 which he had adapted to his own needs. Forget cramped seating and microwaved food on plastic trays. The interior of this plane was beyond belief. But for the noise of the engines and the occasional turbulence, it would have been hard for Alex to believe that he was in the air.

He was glad to be out of England.

The death of Adam Wright had naturally made the front page of every newspaper. It had also been the lead story in all the news programmes on TV. This time, Alex had not been involved—and for that he had to thank Tamara Knight. She alone knew that he had seen and followed one of the killers at Stamford Bridge, and when the body in the shower had been discovered, she had decided to keep this information to herself.

As she said to Alex, he'd been through enough. Force Three had already claimed responsibility for the murder, explaining that the footballer had been another victim in their war against Drevin. What difference would it make if Alex was dragged into it once again?

Tamara was on the plane too, sitting in one of the Leather chairs, reading a book. Alex had glanced at the cover and seen the title. She was reading a history of space travel, obviously preparing herself for the launch that was to take place in just three days' time. She glanced up briefly as he prepared to take his next serve, then turned a page.

Alex lost the serve and, two points later, the game. He wondered if they'd reached the coast of Canada yet.

It had been almost five hours since they had left Heathrow, and even with all the comforts of the 747, he was aware that he was in that strange, empty space, hovering on the edge of the world between two time zones.

“Are you hungry?” Paul asked him.

“No thanks,” Alex replied. The plane had a cook and two stewardesses, who had served a brunch of fresh fruit, coffee and croissants just after they had taken off.

“We can watch a film if you like.”

“All right.”

Paul put down his bat and slumped into one of the nearby chairs. “It’s a shame we won’t have more time in New York,” he said. “I really wanted to show it to you. It’s a cool city just to wander around in. And it’s got great shops. I was going to buy a whole load of gear.”

“How long are we there for?” Alex asked.

“Dad says just one day. He’s got some people to see—or we’d be going straight to Flamingo Bay.” Paul pressed a button in the arm of his chair and a moment later one of the stewardesses appeared.

“Can we watch a film?” he asked.

“Of course.” The stewardess smiled. “I’ll bring you the menu. And would you like something to drink?”

“I’ll have a Coke. Alex?”

“No. I’m fine.”

Alex sat down opposite Paul, avoiding the other boy’s eye. It seemed to him that Paul was more like his father than perhaps he realized. Despite his protests, he fitted comfortably into this billionaire lifestyle, taking the private plane, the houses all over the world and the complete freedom for granted. Right now the two of them should have been at school. Alex thought of Brookland and a big part of him yearned to be with his friends, larking around and getting into trouble—back in the real world.

He was feeling guilty because, although he’d said nothing to Paul, he had already made his decision. As soon as he arrived in New York, he was going to leave the Drevin household. He felt sorry for Paul. More and more the other boy seemed to be relying on his friendship, taking him for granted like everything else.

Paul hadn’t chosen any of this but he was stuck with it, and one day it would be him jetting around the world, making all the important decisions.

But Alex had had enough. Nikolei Drevin had nothing he wanted. More than that, Alex was becoming increasingly uneasy, aware of an invisible net closing in. He had now encountered Force Three twice. He might not be so lucky a third time. Whatever their argument with Drevin, he didn’t want to be any part of it.

And then there was the question of Drevin himself. There was so much about the man that didn’t add up. If he was so concerned about Paul’s safety, why hadn’t he put any guards in place at St Dominic’s? And was it just coincidence that the kidnappers had taken Alex to a building that Drevin—or one of Drevin’s many companies—actually owned? Alex thought about his meeting with Kaspar. The Force Three leader had been about to cut off one of his fingers—and would have if Alex hadn’t convinced him who he really was.

If Paul Drevin had been kidnapped, he would have been maimed. Why? Was there some sort of private vendetta between Nikolei Drevin and Kaspar that both men were keeping concealed?

Alex didn't trust Drevin. That was the simple truth. When they had raced against each other, Drevin had tried to kill him. If Alex had flipped over inside the tunnel, he might have been crushed—and all because the Russian didn't like losing. He had lost again at Chelsea, and as a result a man had died. Was Drevin responsible for that too? Alex remembered seeing him talking on his mobile seconds after the game had ended. And when Alex had spotted Silver Tooth, he had been slipping something into his pocket. Could it have been a phone?

Was it possible that he had been taking his orders directly from Drevin?

Well, he had decided. As soon as he arrived in New York, he was going to call Jack Starbright, who was only a couple of hours away in Washington. He knew she'd be happy for him to join her, especially if she thought he was in any danger. He would tell Nikolei Drevin that he was homesick. It didn't matter what excuse he made up. When Drevin and his son flew to Flamingo Bay, they would be travelling without him.

“Is everything all right, Alex?”

Alex looked up and realized that Tamara Knight had been examining him. He still hadn't worked her out.

She had never been particularly friendly to him and seemed completely devoted to Nikolei Drevin. On the other hand, as far as he knew, she had never told Drevin about his involvement in Adam Wright's death.

Right now, she was studying him suspiciously. Maybe she was trying to work him out too.

“I'm fine, thanks,” Alex said.

“Are you looking forward to the launch?”

Alex shrugged. “I suppose so.”

Paul had chosen a film. The lights in the centre of the cabin dimmed and a few minutes later it began.

It was just after one o'clock. New York time, when they touched down at JFK Airport. Nikolei Drevin had come out of his study for the last hour of the flight, dictating a letter to Tamara and chatting to Paul. Part of the conversation was in Russian and Alex got the feeling that father and son were talking about him.

The 747 taxied to a holding area. Looking out of a window, Alex saw a chauffeur-driven limousine waiting to meet them. He guessed that a man as rich and influential as Drevin wouldn't have to queue up at immigration with everyone else, and he was right. The door of the plane opened electronically and two men in suits—customs and immigration—were shown in. One of them had a metal attaché case which contained a computer and an old-fashioned passport stamp.

“Good afternoon, Mr Drevin, sir,” the man said. He was young, clean-shaven, with short blond hair and dark glasses. “Welcome to New York.”

“Thank you.” Drevin held out his passport. The man ran it through the scanner on his computer

without so much as glancing at it, then stamped one of the pages. He did the same for Paul and Tamara. He took Alex's last, gazed at the photograph and lowered it behind the lid of his case. For a moment it was out of sight as he scanned it, but then he was holding it up again with a look of polite puzzlement.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said to Drevin. "We have a problem here."

"What problem?" Drevin was annoyed.

"This passport is out of date. It expired two days ago."

"That's not possible." Drevin reached for the passport. He looked at the expiry date, then at Alex. "The man is correct," he said.

"No." Alex was shocked. It was true he hadn't looked closely at his passport for a long time, but he was certain he'd only had it four years. There was an absurd photograph of him aged ten; he remembered going with Jack to have it taken. "It can't be!" he protested.

Drevin handed him the passport. Alex studied it. It was the same photo. The terrible haircut embarrassed him as it always did. There was his signature, and Ian Rider's name and address as next of kin. But the immigration man was correct. His passport had expired the day before he left London.

"But how can it have happened?" Alex asked. He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. "Why didn't they notice at Heathrow?"

"I guess they didn't look closely enough," the American said.

"What does this mean?" Drevin asked. His voice was cold.

"Well, sir, I'm very sorry but we can't allow your guest to enter the United States. In normal circumstances he'd be sent back home, but I guess we can work something out. How long do you plan to be here?"

"Less than twenty-four hours," Drevin replied. "We leave tomorrow."

"In that case, we can hold Mr Rider here at the airport. It'll be like he's in transit. You can pick him up again when you leave."

"But the child only wishes to stay here one night. Surely he can't be such a threat to American security that you won't allow him to stay with me!"

"I'm very sorry, Mr Drevin. It's like I say. Really he should be on his way back to the UK. I'm stretching things as it is. But I can't allow him in."

"I don't understand it," Alex insisted. "I only got it four years ago—I'm sure of it." He was feeling wretched. Both Drevin and his son were staring at him as if this were all his fault, which, he supposed, in a way it was.

"It seems we have no choice in the matter, Alex," Drevin said. He turned to the immigration officer.

"Where will you hold him?"

"We have rooms here at the airport, sir. He'll have a TV and a shower. I can assure you he'll be

fine.”

“Then it seems we’ll have to pick you up tomorrow, Alex.”

Drevin got up and left the aircraft. Paul and Tamara followed. The assistant had said nothing throughout the discussion. Alex looked out of the window as they got into the limousine. A moment later they drove away and he found himself alone with the two Americans.

“Do you have any hand luggage?” the immigration man asked.

“No.”

“OK. My name’s Shulsky, by the way. Ed Shulsky. You’d better come with me.”

Alex followed the American down onto the tarmac, the customs official close behind. There was another car waiting for them and Alex climbed into the back. Shulsky took the front seat. The other man stayed behind.

“Just relax. This won’t take long,” Shulsky said.

The doors had locked themselves automatically. Feeling far from relaxed, Alex sat back and watched where they were going.

They drove out of the airport, passing through a double barrier and a gate. That already struck him as odd.

Hadn’t Shulsky just said he was going to have to spend the night at JFK? But it seemed they were heading for Manhattan. The driver joined the traffic on the freeway that led to Brooklyn Bridge, and suddenly Alex found himself looking across the water to the most famous skyline in the world. Even now, even in these circumstances, the view couldn’t fail to thrill him, the magnificent arrogance of the skyscrapers packed together on the cramped, chaotic island a monument to power and success and the American way of life.

Alex leant forward. “Where are we going?” he demanded.

“We’ll be there soon,” Shulsky answered.

“I thought you said we were staying at the airport.”

“Relax, Alex. We’ll look after you just fine.”

Alex knew something was going on. There had been nothing wrong with his passport. He was sure of it.

But there wasn’t anything he could do. He was locked in a car on the other side of the world and he might just as well sit back and—as the Americans would say—be taken for the ride.

He looked out of the window as they crossed the bridge and turned north, heading past the terrible empty space where the World Trade Center had once stood. He had visited New York a couple of times and had happy memories of the city. Now he was being driven through SoHo, in south Manhattan.

The car slowed down and he noticed an art gallery with a window full of cartoons, its name printed in gold letters on the glass. They turned into a parking garage. Alex sighed and shook his head. Now

he knew exactly where he was.

In Miami they had called themselves Centurion International Advertising. The gallery here in New York was called Creative Ideas Animation. Two different names but the same three letters.

CIA.

The car drove up to the first floor of the garage and stopped. Shulsky got out and opened the door for Alex.

“This way,” he announced.

Alex followed him to a bare metal door that could have led into a storage cupboard or perhaps an electric generator room. A keypad was built into the wall and Shulsky entered a seven-digit code. There was a buzz and the door opened. Alex walked through into an empty corridor with a closed-circuit television camera pointing down at him from above and another locked door at the end. It swung open as he approached.

There was a comfortable reception area on the other side, and, beyond that, open-plan offices filled with phones and computers. Two telephonists sat behind the main desk, and men and women in suits walked along the carpeted corridors. A black man with white hair and a moustache was waiting to greet him. Alex recognized him at once. His name was Joe Byrne. He was the deputy director for operations in the Covert Action section of the Central Intelligence Agency of America.

“Nice to see you again, Alex,” he said.

“I’m not so sure,” Alex replied. He remembered how his passport had briefly disappeared into Shulsky’s attaché case. “You swapped my passport,” he said. “The one you showed Drevin was a fake.”

Joe Byrne nodded. “Come this way. Let me show you to my office. I think it’s time you and I had a little chat.”

THE BIGGEST CRIMINAL IN THE WORLD

Byrne's office was identical to the one that Alex had visited in Miami. It had the same ordinary furniture, the same blank walls, the same air-conditioning turned up one notch too high. Only the view was different.

Alex guessed he probably had something similar in just about every major city in America.

"You fancy a drink?" Byrne asked as he sat down behind his desk.

"Some water, thanks." There were a couple of bottles on a sideboard. Alex helped himself.

"It's good to see you again, Alex." Byrne sounded tired. He looked as if he hadn't been to bed for a week. "I was never able to thank you for the work you did for us on Skeleton Key."

"I was sorry about your agents."

"Tom Turner and Belinda Troy. Yeah, it was too bad. I was sorry to lose them. But that wasn't your fault.

You did a great job." Byrne ran his eyes over Alex. "You look in good shape," he went on. "I was sorry to hear you got hurt in London. I told that boss of yours, Alan Blunt, that it wasn't a good idea getting a kid involved in this sort of work. Of course, he didn't listen to me. He never does. In a way, that's why you're here now."

"Why am I here now?"

"We had to get you away from Drevin without alerting him to the fact that the CIA was involved," Byrne explained. "Like you said, we swapped your passport, so now he thinks you're tied up with customs and immigration. That gives us a chance to have a talk. As a matter of fact, I was rather hoping you might be able to help us."

"Forget it, Mr Byrne." Alex shook his head. "I'd already made up my mind before we landed. I don't want anything more to do with Drevin. So if you don't mind putting me on a plane to Washington, I'll say goodbye."

"Washington?" Byrne raised an eyebrow. "It's funny you should mention that. But I'm afraid you can't just walk out of here, Alex. Apart from anything else, you're an illegal immigrant, remember?" He quickly raised a hand in a conciliatory gesture. "Just hear me out. What I've got to say may be of genuine interest to you. And when I've finished, then you can tell me what you think. The truth is, right now you're in a unique situation. You could be very useful to us. And you have no idea how much is at stake."

Alex sighed. "Where have I heard that before?" He opened the bottle of water and sat down opposite the CIA man. "OK. Go ahead."

"Well, as you've probably guessed, this is all about Drevin," Byrne began. "Nikolei Vladimir Drevin. By our count, he's the fourth or fifth richest man alive and, of course, the British just love him. He's bought a soccer team; he's a big businessman; he gives money to charity. And then there's

Ark Angel. Thanks to him, you British are going to corner the market in space tourism, and that's a prize worth having. But I'm afraid it's not as easy as that. You see, for the last eighteen months the CIA and the State Department have been investigating Drevin, and we've discovered that he isn't quite what he seems. I'm talking about organized crime, Alex. And all roads lead straight to him. To put it in a nutshell, we think he's just about the biggest criminal in the world."

Byrne paused. Alex showed no reaction. After all he'd been through, he no longer had it in him to be surprised.

"It's complicated," Byrne went on. "And even though you flew over here on Drevin's sky palace, I guess you're probably jet-lagged. So I'll give it to you in broad strokes.

"To understand Drevin, you have to go back to the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early nineties.

Communism was finished and the whole country was looking forward to a fresh start. But there was a problem. The new Russian government was broke. It needed money badly and it decided to sell off all its assets, which is to say, its car manufacturing centres, its hydroelectrical plants, its airline and—most crucial of all—its oilfields. They sold them cheap, often for a fraction of their real value. They had no choice, because they needed the money fast and they needed it up front. In the next few years a new group of businessmen appeared. They were in the right place at the right time and they saw that this was a fantastic opportunity. These people weren't going to become millionaires overnight. As share prices rose, they were going to become billionaires—and that's exactly what happened.

"Nikolei Drevin was one of these people, but he was very different to the rest. We don't know a lot about his past. It's hard to find out anything that's happened in Russia in the last twenty years. We believe that Drevin started off in the army. He was certainly a senior figure in the KGB. Then we lose track of him until he re-emerges with a successful business selling—of all things—gardening equipment. He also dabbled in shares, particularly oil. He was doing well, but not that well, and when the sale of the century started he didn't have enough money to cut himself a slice.

"And this was when he had his big idea. His work with the army and the KGB had brought him into contact with the Russian underworld—I'm talking about the mafiya. He knew all the big names and so he went to them for a loan. You see, he was a respectable businessman. He'd seen the future, and with their support he could buy into it big time. He needed about eighty million dollars, enough to buy a controlling interest in Novgerol, one of the big Russian oil companies. The mafiya met with him and decided they liked him, but they didn't have enough money, so they turned to their friends in Japan. You've heard of the yakuza? Well, they were interested too, and just to round things off, the Chinese triads also decided to join the party. Between the three of them they raised the finance and Drevin was in. Suddenly he was a major player.

"So he bought into Novgerol. He got it for a song and the people who suffered in the end were the Russian people. It was their oil and it was more or less stolen from them. I doubt that Drevin lost any sleep over that. His shares doubled and trebled and multiplied by about a hundred, and he was able to pay back all his criminal friends with interest, and that was the end of that. Of course, there were people who got in his way. There were protesters. The police launched an inquiry. And do you know what? They were all murdered. You only had to sneeze at Drevin and someone would call round at your house with a machine gun. Kill you. Kill your family. Kill everyone who knew you. It was easier to keep quiet and, believe me, after a while, people did just that.

“So Drevin is in with the mafiya. He’s in with the yakuza. And he’s in with the triads. And of course, once these people know him, they’re not going to leave him alone. Not that Drevin cares. He’s got as much money as anyone could possibly want; but the funny thing is, people like that—they always want more. So he keeps working with them. He becomes, if you like, the banker for half the criminal organizations in the world. The yakuza are selling Russian energetics weapons to terrorist groups; the triads are running drugs out of Burma and Afghanistan; the mafiya are moving into drugs and prostitution throughout the West. Drevin provides the cash flow. I would say that around the world there are hundreds of dirty deals done every day and Drevin’s money is behind just about all of them.”

“If you know so much about him, why don’t you arrest him?” Alex asked. His head was spinning. He had just spent almost a week living with this man and he was trying to marry what Byrne was saying with what he had himself observed. He had guessed that Drevin was no saint; but he had never suspected anything like this.

“We’re going to arrest him,” Byrne replied. “I told you. We’ve been investigating him for over a year. But when you’re dealing with the really big criminals, Alex, it’s not as easy as you might think. I mean, look at Al Capone. He was one of America’s worst gangsters. Nobody knows how many people he had killed. But despite all the work of the FBI, in the end all they could get him for was fiddling his income tax. It’s the same with Drevin.

“He’s clever; he’s covered his back. A deal here, a deal there—he leaves no trace. We get whispers and hints that he’s involved, but it’s like trying to build a castle out of individual grains of sand. Witnesses are too scared to talk. Anyone who comes forward gets killed. Even so, slowly but surely, we’ve been building a case against him. The State Department has collected over two thousand documents. There are transcripts, tape and video recordings, photographs. There’s been a team of thirty people working round the clock for months; there still is. And they’ve all had to be protected. From the start, we’ve been afraid that Drevin might try to get to them. He might even send people in to destroy the evidence. Mercenaries. Suicide bombers. I wouldn’t put anything past him. So we’ve stored it all somewhere really safe.”

“Where?”

“That’s why I was interested just now when you mentioned Washington. The case against Drevin is lodged in probably the safest place in the United States. Inside the Pentagon.”

Byrne got up and helped himself to a bottle of water. All the talking had made him look more exhausted than ever.

“We plan to arrest Drevin one week from today. I hardly need tell you that this information is highly classified. The real problem is Ark Angel. The British government’s invested billions in the space station, and when we arrest Drevin, the whole project could collapse. That’s why we’ve had to wait. We’ve had to be absolutely sure that we’ve tied up all the loose ends before we make our move.

“Of course, MI6 know what we’re doing. There’s no way we could stop them finding out. We’ve shown them the evidence but they don’t want to believe it. They can’t afford to believe it. When Drevin goes down, there’s going to be a scandal that’ll rip the whole financial market apart. But that’s too bad. The man is a crook; he belongs in jail.”

“So why do you need me?” Alex asked.

Byrne sat down again. “Because something’s happened,” he admitted. “Something we don’t understand—
and you seem to be in the middle of it.”

“Force Three.”

“Exactly. Here’s a group of people who call themselves eco-warriors and who seem to have picked a fight with Drevin, supposedly because he wiped out a few bird species on Flamingo Bay. But we don’t know where they came from. We don’t know who they are. We even wonder if Drevin himself isn’t using them as some sort of diversion to distract us from our investigation. Your Mrs Jones is trying to get to the bottom of it right now—but we’re running out of time. I’m worried Drevin is going to pull some kind of stunt in the next seven days and slip through our fingers. Maybe he’s going to disappear. He could head off to South America, or there are parts of Australia where we’d never find him. A man with his connections wouldn’t find it difficult to build himself a new identity. We need to know if he’s planning to leave and, if so, where he might be going. That’s where you come in.

I’ve already got one agent inside his organization, but that’s not enough. Drevin’s too careful. He’s not giving anything away. But you’re different. You’re right in the middle of the family. You’re buddies with Paul Drevin. And the best thing is, they don’t know anything about you. You’re above suspicion. They certainly don’t know about your connection with us.

“Tomorrow they’re going to take you with them to Flamingo Bay. It’s like Skeleton Key all over again. We can’t get anyone in there. He’s got the rocket base on the south of the island and the whole place is protected by his own private security force. It’s not even American soil. The island is ten miles off the coast of Barbados and it just happens to belong to the British. Drevin leased it from your government when he built his space centre there. So we can’t go storming in.

“All I’m asking is for you to hang in there for one more week and report back if you see anything going on.

It’ll just be a vacation as far as you’re concerned. You’re Drevin’s guest—”

“I was Drevin’s guest,” Alex cut in. “I told you. I’m leaving.”

“Why?”

Alex shrugged. “What you’ve told me about him—I didn’t much like him anyway. And now I don’t want to go anywhere near him.”

“You won’t be in any danger.”

“That’s what you said last time, Mr Byrne. And I nearly got killed. Two of your agents did get killed.”

“And if you hadn’t helped us, thousands more people would have died too.” Byrne looked genuinely puzzled. “What’s the matter, Alex? Are you scared? Is it because of what happened with the sniper?”

Alex felt a twinge of pain in his chest. It happened every time anyone reminded him of his bullet

wound.

Perhaps it always would. "I'm not scared," he said. "I just don't like being used."

"We only use you because you're so damn good," Byrne replied. "And this time I'm not lying to you. You're not working for MI6 and you're not working for us. I just want you to continue with your vacation and if you see Drevin packing his suitcases or if a submarine turns up in the middle of the night, give us a call.

I've already told you, I've got an agent on the island and there'll be a back-up team just ten miles away on Barbados. You'll be watched all the time. Nothing's going to happen to you. I'm only afraid that somehow Drevin is going to get off the hook. Seven more days, Alex. Then we can make the arrest and you can go home."

"What about Paul?" It was only now that Alex thought about Paul Drevin. He wondered if he knew the truth about his father.

"Nothing will happen to him. He'll be well looked after. I guess he'll go back to his mother."

Alex didn't speak. He wanted to refuse but something was stopping him. He didn't want Byrne to think he was afraid. Maybe it was as simple as that.

"One week," Byrne promised. "Drevin won't suspect a thing. And just in case you do run into trouble, we've got someone here who might be able to help you."

"Who?"

"He's waiting for you outside."

He stood up and Alex followed him out of the office and down a corridor to an open-plan area. There was a man sitting at a table and Alex recognized him instantly. It would have been hard not to. The man was enormously fat. He was bald with a black moustache and a round, smiling face. He was wearing a brightly coloured Hawaiian shirt that couldn't have looked more inappropriate among the dark suits of the CIA operatives. Alex had never seen so many flowers on one piece of material.

"Hello, Alex!" the man boomed.

"Hello, Mr Smithers," Alex replied.

"What a great pleasure to see you again. You're looking tremendously well, if I may say so. Mrs Jones sends her best wishes."

"She knows I'm here?"

"Oh yes. We've been keeping an eye on you. As a matter of fact, it was she who sent me here." Smithers lowered his voice, although it could still be heard across the room. "We thought you might like one or two new gadgets, and although the Americans do produce a few of their own, I rather think we lead the field.

Not that they'd agree, of course!"

"Gadgets..." Alex watched as Smithers reached down and lifted a briefcase onto the table.

"Absolutely. It wouldn't be any fun without gadgets, would it? And I've come up with some quite

interesting ideas. This, for example.” He produced an object that Alex recognized immediately. It was an inhaler, identical to the one Paul Drevin used. “Now, we happen to know that Drevin’s son has one of these,” Smithers explained. “So if anyone notices this in your luggage, they’ll simply assume it’s his. But it’s fingerprint sensitive and I’ve programmed it for your personal use. When you press the cylinder, it’ll send out a puff of knockout gas. Effective up to about five metres. Alternatively you can twist the cylinder round twice clockwise; that turns it into a hand grenade. Five-second fuse. I tested it on one of my assistants. Poor old Bennett ... he should be out of hospital in a couple of months.”

He passed it across and dived back into the case.

“Eavesdropping,” he went on. “Part of your brief is to listen to anything interesting that Mr Drevin may be saying, and for that you’ll need this.” He brought out a slim white box with a set of headphones. Alex picked it up. It was an iPod. At least, it looked like one. “This uses microwave technology,” Smithers explained. “Point the screen at anyone up to fifty metres away and listen through the headphones. You’ll hear every word they say. You can also use it to contact the CIA. Rotate the click wheel three times anticlockwise and speak into it. I’ve got another version, by the way, packed with enough plastic explosive to blow up a building, but Mr Blunt said you weren’t to have it. Shame, really. I call it the i-x-Plod.

“And one last thing. Flamingo Bay is a tropical island with lots of creepy-crawlies. So this might help...”

Once again he reached into the case and this time came out with a glass bottle marked: STINGO

Jungle-strength mosquito lotion

“Mosquito repellent,” Alex said.

“Absolutely not,” Smithers replied. “This is a very powerful formulation and it actually does the exact opposite. It attracts mosquitoes. In fact, once you open the bottle, it’ll attract just about every insect on the island. You might find it useful if you need a diversion.” He closed the case and stood up. “I’m off to St Lucia,” he announced. “A little holiday—and it’ll give me a chance to test my shark-repellent swimming trunks. So I won’t be too far away if you need me, although I’m sure you won’t. Chin-chin!”

Smithers wandered off down another corridor. Alex was left with Joe Byrne.

“So will you do it?” Byrne asked.

Alex stared at the three gadgets on the table. “It looks like everyone’s already made up my mind for me.”

“That’s great, Alex. Thank you.” Byrne gestured and the blond-haired man who had brought Alex from the airport came over. “You’ve already met Special Agent Shulsky,” he said.

“Call me Ed,” the agent said. Without the dark glasses and the intimidating manner, he seemed a lot more pleasant. Alex guessed he was still in his twenties; he looked as if he hadn’t long graduated from college.

“Agent Shulsky will be heading the back-up operation,” Byrne explained. “He and a dozen people will be based on Barbados. That’s where you’ll be landing, by the way. Flamingo Bay doesn’t have

its own airstrip.

The moment you call, they'll come running.”

Shulsky smiled. “It’s a real pleasure to be working with you, Alex,” he said. “They showed us your file. I have to say, it’s more than impressive.”

“Is there anything else you want to know?” Byrne asked.

“Yes. There is one thing,” Alex said. “This all came about because I just happened to be in the room next to Paul Drevin at St Dominic’s Hospital. But it was no coincidence, was it? Mr Blunt put me there because he hoped I’d meet Paul and become friends with him.”

Byrne hesitated. “I can’t answer that for sure, Alex,” he said. “But I will say this much: Alan Blunt does have a knack of making events work his way.”

So it was true. Alex could have been taken to any hospital in London. But even as he lay there bleeding with a bullet in his chest, the MI6 chief had been planning ahead, engineering his next assignment. It was almost beyond belief. No. Where Blunt was concerned, it was to be expected.

“Shulsky will take you back to the airport,” Byrne added. “We’ll sort you out a temporary passport and Drevin will pick you up tomorrow. Good luck on Flamingo Bay.”

“Just don’t expect any postcards,” Alex said.

He and Ed Shulsky left together. Byrne shook his head and walked slowly back the other way.

FLAMINGO BAY

The six-seater Cessna 195 seaplane circled the island almost lazily before it came in to land. Alex, along with Paul and his father, had been flown from New York to Grantley Adams International Airport on the south-east corner of Barbados. From there they had been taken by car a few miles up the coast to Ragged Point, where the seaplane had been waiting for the final ten-mile flight to Drevin's private island.

Alex could see it now, his face pressed against the window with the single propeller buzzing noisily and the starboard wing stretching out above his head. From the air, Flamingo Bay looked as ridiculously beautiful as every Caribbean island, the colours almost too intense to be true. There was the dazzling blue of the ocean, the immaculate white beaches, the rich, elemental green of the pine trees and rainforest. The weather couldn't have been more perfect for the coming launch. As the plane arced for a second time, tilting towards the stretch of water that would be its landing strip, brilliant sunshine blazed in through the window.

"There it is!" Paul Drevin leant past Alex and pointed. "You can see the launch site!" he exclaimed.

The island was about two miles long and shaped like a leaping fish. The rocket gantries stood where the eye should have been. There were two of them, right next to the sea, with about a dozen brick buildings, many of them surmounted with satellite dishes, about a quarter of a mile away. The ground in this area was quite bare, all the vegetation burned away, presumably by rocket exhaust. Alex remembered what Kaspar had told him when he had been a prisoner of Force Three. Four bird species had been made extinct on the island. He was surprised it hadn't been more.

If the head of the fish was naked, the rest of it was covered with dense rainforest separated by a narrow track which ran the full length of the island. The track led to a tall fence running north to south, with a checkpoint and a series of wooden cabins near by. This was the only way into the launch site. There were watchtowers all over the island, making sure that nobody could approach unseen by sea.

Drevin's house had been built on what Alex thought of as the fish's tail. It was a simple white structure, and even from this distance he could see that it was ultra-modern with giant glass windows giving uninterrupted views of the sea. The arched belly of the fish was one long beach with palm trees leaning towards the water. As the plane dipped down, Alex saw a brightly painted wooden jetty, three motor launches and a couple of sailing boats anchored in the shallows. He couldn't hear music from steel drums or smell the rum—but it was easy to imagine them.

"Fasten your seat belts," Drevin said. "We are about to land."

Drevin was sitting on the other side of the aisle, wearing a pale yellow open-necked shirt. He hadn't spoken much on the journey from New York, not even when he had fetched Alex from the departure lounge at JFK. Alex got the impression that Drevin blamed him personally for the mix-up over the passport. Or perhaps he was annoyed with the American authorities for inconveniencing one of his guests.

Now he was deep in thought, tugging at his ring. In the bright sunlight his face looked more pale than

ever.

Alex was grateful for the silence. He wasn't sure how to behave with Drevin any more. Everything Joe Byrne had told him was tumbling around in his head. In the space of just a few days, Drevin had gone from being a reclusive billionaire who didn't like losing, to the biggest criminal in the world. He was involved with the mafiya and the triads, who—only a few months ago—had tried to kill Alex. People who got in his way died. He was another monster and here he was, sitting just a few seats away.

The Cessna swept down and landed smoothly, water spraying up towards the windows. It taxied towards the jetty and came to a halt. Paul Drevin was the first to stand up, followed by Tamara Knight, who had been sitting directly behind Alex. They made their way out into the soft heat of the Caribbean afternoon.

There was an electric buggy waiting for them, the sort that was normally used on golf courses. Drevin had already explained that there was very little petrol on the island; electric vehicles were easier. Now that he was back on land, he seemed more cheerful.

“We'll go to the house first and change,” he announced. “Alex, I'm sure you'd like to see around the island.

We can do that before dinner. Tomorrow I'll be busy with preparations for the launch, so the two of you will have to amuse yourselves. But there's plenty to do. Swimming, scuba-diving, sailing... Welcome, you might say, to paradise.”

Drevin drove them the short distance to Little Point, the corner of the island where the house stood. The building was as impressive in its own way as every property that Drevin owned. It was almost futuristic, white with huge windows that retracted into the walls, so that at the press of a button it could be either open to the elements or enclosed. It had been raised about half a metre above the ground, presumably to allow the air to circulate. Thick, wooden legs supported it on a rocky shelf facing west. Alex guessed that the sunsets would be spectacular. There were only three bedrooms. Tamara would be staying on the other side of the island. Alex was next door to Paul. His room had two single beds, an en suite bathroom and plenty of space.

Ten minutes later, dressed in a T-shirt, knee-length shorts and sandals, Alex was back in the buggy next to Paul. It was early in the afternoon and the sun was still strong. Drevin drove them along the single track.

Although the island couldn't have been more than half a mile wide, the sea had disappeared from view, lost behind a seemingly impenetrable screen of vegetation. Here the atmosphere was damp and heavy, and Alex could hear thousands of insects already active among the leaves.

They passed the cabins that Alex had seen from the air, and immediately afterwards came to an electric gate with a checkpoint and three guards on patrol. They were the first guards Alex had seen. They were dressed in pale grey overalls with a logo—a pair of wings and a streak of light—printed on the left side of their chest. They wore combat boots and carried black Mini Uzi 19mm sub-machine guns. Seeing the vicious weapons, Alex felt a twinge of unease. Joe Byrne had made this visit to Flamingo Bay sound very safe and straightforward. He was there to make sure Drevin didn't run away. Nothing more than that. But if something did go wrong, if Drevin found out that Alex had been in contact with the CIA, he would be trapped. He had no doubt that the motor boats would be

neutralized at night. The plane had already left.

Barbados and the CIA back-up team were ten miles away. Once again Alex found himself surrounded by an enemy army and, as usual, he was on his own.

The buggy stopped and a man appeared, dressed in the same grey uniform as the guards. He was an ugly man, aged in his thirties, with round cheeks, thick lips and curling, ginger-coloured hair. There was something about his face that didn't look quite real. His skin was deathly pale, as if he never stepped out into the sun. Alex could see the man's paunch pressing against his overalls. He wasn't just unfit. He looked ill.

"Good afternoon, Mr Drevin," he said. His voice suited his appearance. The words came out in a strained, unpleasant whisper as if he had something caught in his throat.

"Good afternoon." Drevin turned to the two boys. "This is one of the most important people on the island,"

he explained. "His name is Magnus Payne and he's the head of security." He looked at Payne. "You haven't met my son, Paul; and his friend, Alex Rider."

The security man nodded at Alex. "Nice to meet you, Alex," he said, and at that moment Alex was conscious of two things. Although he knew it was impossible, he wondered if he'd met Payne before. And there was something else. Something that felt wrong. But what?

"I should warn you that Payne has complete control over this side of the island," Drevin was explaining.

"You must do what he tells you. And please don't try to get past here without his authorization."

"What's the point of a security barrier?" Alex asked. "This is an island. If someone wanted to break in, they could just swim round."

"Razor wire," Magnus Payne rasped. "Under the water. They could try, but it would be rather painful."

He raised a hand and the gate slid open, activated from inside the checkpoint. Payne climbed into the buggy next to Drevin and the four of them continued to the launch area.

Alex had seen many amazing things in his life, but the sight before him was something he knew he would never forget.

The rocket was right in front of him, on the edge of a flat, empty area, pointing towards the sky and supported by two steel arms reaching out from a huge gantry. It was at least fifty metres tall, slender and more beautiful than anything Alex could have imagined. He had seen rockets in museums; he had watched launches on TV. But this was different. It was surrounded by a vast, blue sky which seemed suddenly endless. And yet, sitting there, it seemed to radiate the power that was contained in the four solid rocket boosters that would, very soon, blast it into space. About twenty people were working around it. The rocket dwarfed them, making them look tiny.

"We call it Gabriel 7," Drevin said, and he couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice. "It's an Atlas 2AS

rocket. You can just make out the payload.” He pointed to a bulging shape close to the rocket’s tip. “It’s covered with an aerodynamic fairing,” he went on. “It has to survive the ascent through the atmosphere.

But underneath, there’s a glass and steel observation module weighing 1.8 tonnes. It will take the Atlas just fifteen minutes to carry it into space, and the day after tomorrow it’ll be up there, three hundred miles above our heads. The heart of Ark Angel!”

Paul shook his head. “It’s really cool!”

“Cool?” Drevin snapped. “I despise this modern teenage slang! You use ghetto language to describe what you can’t even begin to imagine. Coot? Is that all you can say?”

“What about the other rocket?” Alex asked.

He had seen the second gantry from the plane. It was further along the shore, a clear distance from the Atlas. The second rocket, slightly smaller, also seemed to be waiting for blast-off. More people surrounded it, working on the final preparations.

“Mr Payne?” Drevin turned to his head of security.

“We’ve brought forward the launch,” Payne explained in his rasping voice. “We plan to send it up immediately after Gabriel 7.”

“Why?” Alex wondered.

“We are involved in a series of long-term experiments,” Drevin said. “We need to know more about the effects of weightlessness on the human body. The second rocket is a Soyuz-Fregat. It will carry a model of the human system into space.”

“What does that mean?” Alex asked.

“An ape.”

“I didn’t realize you were still allowed to use animals.”

Drevin shrugged. “It’s not ideal. But there’s no other way.”

They drove to the first of the brick buildings. It was the largest in the compound, with three satellite dishes pointing up at the sky. “This is the control centre,” Payne told them. “The other buildings are for storage and construction. We also have sleeping quarters and recreation facilities. There are more than sixty people working on the island.”

They went in, along a corridor and into a large room with slanting windows looking out onto the launch site. Above the windows was a giant screen, blank at the moment but ready to transmit pictures of the launch itself. There were about twenty computers, arranged in two groups, facing each other. One group was marked COMMAND, the other TELEMETRY. To one side Alex noticed a conference table, a dozen chairs and another screen. A huge board with hundreds of light bulbs spelt out various information including LTST—local true solar time—the space equivalent of GMT. There was less to the control centre than Alex had imagined. In many ways it was like an oversized classroom.

A man had stood up as they came in. He was short but thickset, and looked either Chinese or Korean with neat black hair, wire-framed spectacles and a pencil moustache. He was dressed like a

businessman in a smart jacket and tie. The clothes couldn't have been less appropriate on a Caribbean island, but of course the climate in the control room was conditioned. Alex could feel the sterile air blowing cold on his bare arms and legs.

Drevin introduced him. "This is Professor Sing Joo-Chan, the flight director here on Flamingo Bay. We were very lucky to be able to recruit him from the Khrunichev Space Centre."

"How do you do." Sing spoke with a cultured English accent. He shook hands with Alex and Paul, but the dark brown eyes behind the glasses showed no interest in them at all. They were children. They had no place here. That was what the eyes seemed to say.

"This is where it all happens," Drevin went on. "We'll be controlling both the launch and the docking procedure from here. Of course, most of the procedure is computerized. But we have a camera fitted into Gabriel 7's nose. Travelling three hundred miles at the speed of light, it takes about 0.001 seconds for the images to be relayed back here. It's a bit like a giant computer game, except when you press a button here you're manoeuvring about four tonnes of equipment in outer space. You can't afford mistakes."

Sing shook his head. "There will be no mistakes," he assured them.

"Have we had the latest weather reports?" Drevin asked.

"Yes, Mr Drevin. I've gone over the meteorological charts myself and the conditions are exactly as predicted."

"Good." Drevin was pleased. "Nine o'clock on Wednesday morning. It's a sight you boys won't forget."

"Can't we get any closer?" Paul asked.

Professor Sing looked away, as if the question was too stupid to answer. Alex wondered what it was about the man that he didn't like. Perhaps it was his complete lack of enthusiasm. There was no emotion in his face—and none in his voice. How could he be in charge of such a huge project and not feel the excitement of it?

"If you were any closer you'd be deafened." Drevin said. "When Gabriel 7 is launched, the vibration levels will be huge. They'd destroy your eardrums if you were too close. Even in here we'll need to be completely insulated."

"I'm afraid I must ask for some time with you, Mr Drevin," Sing interrupted. "I need to discuss the launch trajectory dispersions."

Drevin turned to Alex and Paul. "Magnus will show you around the rest of the base if there's anything else you wish to see. We'll meet again at dinner."

"Sure." Alex tried to smile, but he didn't look up. He could no longer trust himself to meet Drevin's gaze.

And there was something else that was worrying him. The more he saw of the island—the rockets, the launch pad, the space centre—the more he felt a nameless sense of dread. It was hard to explain, but Alex was beginning to think that Joe Byrne and the CIA had got it all wrong. Drevin wasn't behaving

like a man about to run away. He had something else in mind. Alex was sure of it.

There were less than forty-five hours until the launch. That might be all the time he had left to find out what it was.

But later that afternoon, Alex was able to forget some of his worries. Paul took him down to the beach and, as promised, gave Alex his first lesson in kite-surfing.

The sport, very simply, combined surfing and kite-flying. As Paul said, you stood on a board and flew a kite, and the wind did the rest. Of course, there was more to it than that. The kite was actually a giant polyester wing—nine metres across—which had to be inflated with a pump. It was connected to Alex by four lines which clipped onto a rubber harness around his waist. Then there was the board, similar to a surfboard but with four fins and twin tips, making it bidirectional. And finally there was the control bar, which he held in front of him. The mechanics were simple enough. The control bar was his steering wheel, which he could raise and lower, turn left and right. The rest was balance and nerve.

Alex was lucky. There wasn't much wind and the sea was fairly calm. But even so, he soon felt the power of the new sport. He started on the edge of the water with Paul about twenty metres behind him, holding the kite. Paul released it and Alex quickly brought it up until it reached the zenith, directly over his head.

While it was there, the kite was essentially in neutral. Carrying the board, Alex waded into the sea until the water was up to his ankles. He put one foot on the board. Then he lowered the kite into the wind.

And he was away. It was an incredible sensation. He could feel his arms straining at their sockets, his whole body tensing against the pull of the kite. Before he knew it, he was moving very fast, skimming over the surface with the spray flying into his eyes. The board was incredibly flexible. All Alex had to do was pull on the control bar and he could change direction instantly. With the late afternoon sun beating down on him and the palm trees rushing past, all his worries about Drevin, the CIA, Ark Angel and Force Three were forgotten. For the next two hours he was happy, finally enjoying the holiday he had been promised.

After the two boys had exhausted themselves with the kite, they flopped down onto the sand and watched as the sun began its descent. It was still very warm. The breeze, blowing gently across the beach, carried the scent of pine and eucalyptus. From this part of the island it was impossible to see the launch pad and the two waiting rockets. A single grey heron perched sedately on the end of the jetty, its eyes fixed on the water, searching for fish. The sailing boats and motor launches bobbed up and down, jostled by the waves.

Alex was lying on his back, enjoying the warmth of the setting sun. He glanced sideways and noticed Paul staring at his bare chest. The scar left by his surgery had healed quickly but it was still very red.

“You must have really hurt yourself,” Paul said.

“Yes.” Alex was reluctant to talk about his fake bicycle accident.

“You've got lots of other cuts and bruises too.”

Alex didn't even look. Every time MI6 had sent him out on a mission, his body had come back with

more souvenirs. He sat up and reached for his T-shirt. "I'm starving," he said, changing the subject. "When's dinner?"

"Not for another hour. But we can grab a snack, if you like."

"No. I'll wait."

Alex pulled on his shirt. The sun was a perfect disc, cut in half by the edge of the world. The sea had turned blood red.

"Do you like it here?" Paul asked.

"It's fantastic. Really great." Alex did his best to inject some enthusiasm into his voice.

"It makes a real change to have someone like you here." Paul stared at the horizon as if searching for the right words. "It must be awful not to have parents," he went on. "But you don't know what it's like having a dad like mine. He's got so much money, and everyone knows who he is. But sometimes I think I don't even know him myself."

"Do you enjoy being with your mother?" Alex asked. He wanted to steer the conversation away from Drevin.

Paul nodded. "Yes. I wish he'd let me see more of her. And it doesn't help being on my own all the time. I sometimes wonder what I'm doing in the middle of all this. It would be a lot easier if there was someone else around."

Alex was feeling increasingly uneasy. Paul had no idea that his entire life was about to self-destruct and that he—Alex—had been sent here to help make it happen. In less than a week's time, the CIA would arrest his father. All Drevin's assets would presumably be seized by the American government. Drevin would go to prison.

And what would happen to Paul? The story would be on the front page of every newspaper all over the world. He'd have to change his name. He'd have to begin all over again, adapting to a completely different life. Somehow he'd have to get used to the fact that he was the son of a ruthless criminal. A killer. But none of this was Alex's fault. He forced himself to remember that. And Paul had a mother who'd be there to look after him when this whole thing exploded. He'd get through it.

The sun had almost disappeared. A great shadow seemed to stretch out across the sea, and Alex watched as the heron flew off, soaring effortlessly over the palm trees. Paradise? Perhaps the bird knew otherwise.

Alex stood up. "Let's go in," he said.

They walked along the beach together, the waves lapping softly near by.

On the other side of the island, another conversation was taking place.

The head of security, Magnus Payne, was standing in a large office overlooking the launch site.

Drevin was sitting on a leather sofa, reading the email that Payne had just handed him.

"Alex Rider is an MI6 agent," Payne was saying. "He may not be working for them now, but he has certainly worked for them in the past—and not once but several times. If they know he is here, it is

quite possible that they have already approached him and asked him to spy on you. I have searched his luggage and found nothing. But that does not mean he isn't equipped in some way."

Drevin lowered the email. "It's not possible!" His fingers began to play with his ring. "A spy? He's fourteen!"

"I agree, of course, that it is unusual." Payne's lips twisted in a sneer. "But I can assure you, Mr Drevin, that my contact is completely reliable. After what happened at the hospital, then at Hornchurch Towers and a third time at Stamford Bridge, I felt that the boy was simply too good to be true. There was something about him ... so I made enquiries." He gestured at the email. "That's the result."

"The bicycle accident?"

"In fact a bullet wound from his last assignment. That's what my contact tells me."

Drevin fell silent. Payne could see his mind at work, turning over the possibilities, making evaluations. It was all there in the watery grey eyes.

"That business with the passport in New York," he said. He snapped his fingers angrily and swore briefly in Russian. "They must have wanted to make contact with him. He was out of my sight for nearly twenty-four hours. They could have been briefing him, telling him what to do."

"They?"

"The Central Intelligence Agency." Drevin spoke the words with loathing. "They're hand in hand with MI6. The boy could be working with either of them. Or both."

"The question is, what do you want to do with him?"

"What do you suggest?"

"He's dangerous. He shouldn't be here. Not now."

"We could send him away."

"Or we could kill him."

Drevin thought for a little longer. He barely seemed to breathe. Magnus Payne waited patiently.

"You're right," Drevin said suddenly. "Paul won't be too happy about it, but that can't be helped. See to it tomorrow, Mr Payne."

He got to his feet.

"Kill him."

DEEP TROUBLE

It was another perfect day. Alex Rider was eating breakfast with Drevin and his son on a terrace perched on the edge of the sea, the waves lapping below them. A servant—all the staff had been brought in from Barbados—had served them cold meat, fruit, cheese and freshly baked rolls. There was a jug of Blue Mountain coffee from Jamaica, one of the most delicious and expensive blends in the world. This was the millionaire lifestyle, all right. A stunning house, a private island, Caribbean sunshine ... a snapshot of another world.

Drevin was in an unusually good mood. It was the day before the launch and Alex could sense his excitement. “What have you boys got planned for today?”

“Do you want to take the kite out again?” Paul asked Alex. “There might be a bit more wind.”

Alex nodded. “Sure.”

“Why don’t you do some waterskiing?” Drevin suggested.

“We could do that too.” Paul was obviously pleased that his father was taking an interest. It seemed to Alex that if Drevin had suggested a sandcastle competition, the other boy would have agreed.

Drevin turned to Alex. “Have you ever dived?”

“Yes.” Alex had been a qualified diver since he was twelve.

“Then why don’t you go out this afternoon? We have all the equipment you need—and you can visit the Mary Belle.” Alex looked puzzled. Drevin went on. “It’s an old transport ship; it was sunk in the Second World War while carrying supplies to the American bases in the Caribbean. Now it’s an excellent dive site.

You can swim into some of the holds.”

Alex had been on wreck dives before. He knew that there was nothing more strangely beautiful, more eerie, than the ghost of an old ship. He turned to Paul. “Do you want to come?”

“I can’t,” Paul said. “My asthma...”

“Scuba is one of the many things Paul is unable to do,” Drevin said. “But I can ask one of the guards to be your buddy. It would be a shame not to see it.”

“Don’t let me stop you, Alex,” Paul added. “Everyone says the Mary Belle is amazing, and I’ve got some homework I’m supposed to do. So you go ahead.”

At that moment, Tamara Knight appeared on the terrace, dressed in a linen jacket and trousers with a pair of sunglasses dangling around her neck. She was carrying a bulging file.

“You’ve got some important correspondence to deal with, Mr Drevin,” she said.

“Thank you, Miss Knight. I’ll be with you in a few minutes.” Drevin nodded at Alex. “Enjoy the

dive,” he said, and went into the house.

“You’re diving?” Tamara asked. She sounded surprised.

“Yes.” Alex wasn’t sure what to say.

“Where?”

“The Mary Belle.”

“Oh yes.” Tamara still wasn’t smiling. “You’d better be careful. I understand it’s very deep. And I hope you don’t see any sharks.”

After breakfast, Alex went back up to his room to fetch his trunks. The shutters had been drawn back and the windows were wide open. He had a spectacular view of the whole of Little Point. Looking out, Alex saw Drevin standing by his buggy, talking into some sort of phone. Alex thought for a moment, then went over to his case and drew out the iPod Smithers had given him. He put on the headphones, turned it on, then pointed the screen in Drevin’s direction. Almost at once, he heard Drevin’s voice. It was so clear, he could have been standing right next to him.

“...for the final preparations. I am going over everything again today. I want all the programming to be double-checked.” A pause. “The boat is coming in tonight at eleven. Not at Little Point. The western tip of the island, behind the launch site. I’ll be waiting for it there...”

There was a movement at the door. It was Paul. “What are you doing, Alex?” he asked. Alex took off the headphones. “Nothing.” Paul saw the iPod. “Are you taking that down to the beach?”

“No. I’m just checking it’s working.” The two of them left together. For the rest of the morning they swam and snorkelled and went out with the kite. This time there was a little more wind and Paul taught Alex a few tricks—jumps and the handle pass. But Alex found it hard to concentrate. All he could think about was the conversation he’d overheard. A boat was arriving that night at eleven. Why? Drevin obviously didn’t want it to be seen. That was why he wasn’t using the jetty near the house. Could it be that he was planning to leave, and, if so, should Alex alert the CIA now? No. It was too soon. Better to get over to the other side of the island once darkness had fallen and see for himself. That was the reason he was here. It would mean slipping past the checkpoint, but of course, he couldn’t swim round.

Alex remembered what the head of security had told him. There was razor wire concealed in the water.

There had to be another way.

Lunch was at one o’clock: delicious shrimp roti served with salad and rice. Then they rested for an hour, avoiding the worst heat of the sun. At half past three there was a knock on Alex’s door and a young black man appeared, wearing the grey overalls of the security staff.

“Mr Rider?” he asked.

Alex got to his feet. “I’m Alex.”

“My name is Kolo. Mr Drevin said you needed a diving buddy.”

“That’s right.”

“You a certified diver?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go!”

Paul wasn’t around. Alex followed Kolo outside and down to an equipment store underneath the house. It was a large room, a cross between a garage and a boathouse. Here there was spare equipment for the various boats, a few nets and, in a separate area, scuba tanks, BCDs, wetsuits, fins and everything else needed to go diving.

“The water’s warm out there,” Kolo said as he hauled out a couple of tanks. “But the Mary Belle is deep, about twenty-two metres. So I’m going to give you a half-body wetsuit and I’ll check out some weights.”

Half an hour later, Alex was dressed in a bright blue neoprene wetsuit that came down to his thighs and halfway down his arms. Kolo was dressed in black. Carrying his equipment, Alex staggered out onto the beach, where a boat with a Bajan skipper was waiting to take the two of them out to sea.

“Good luck, Alex!”

Alex turned to see Paul Drevin standing on the terrace above him, waving. He waved back, then climbed into the boat.

The journey only took a few minutes. In that time, Alex went over his equipment, running through the usual checks. His mask fitted. The BCD was brand new. He turned on his air supply and checked his gauge. He had been given just under 3,000 psi. Alex made a quick calculation. The deeper he went, the more air he’d use. But he was a light breather. At twenty-two metres, the depth of the Mary Belle, he guessed he would have a bottom time of at least half an hour.

He noticed Kolo watching him as he finished his preparations. Alex had been looking forward to visiting the wreck, but suddenly he felt uncomfortable. He had been diving many times with his uncle and once with friends, and each time it had been a happy, sociable affair. Now he was in a boat with a captain who hadn’t said a word and a buddy who had barely spoken either. Two hired hands taking the rich kid for a ride. For a moment, he understood the loneliness that Paul must have felt all his life.

The boat slowed down and the anchor was lowered. The captain raised a flag—red with a white stripe—

signalling that there were divers in the area. Kolo helped Alex put on his equipment. Then it was time for the briefing.

“The Mary Belle is right underneath us,” Kolo told him. “We’ll enter the water over this side and then if everything’s all right, we’ll go straight down. The sea’s a little choppy today and visibility’s not so good, but you’ll soon see the wreck. We’ll start at the stern. You can see the rudder and propeller. Then we’ll swim up the deck and into the second hold. There’s plenty of fish down there. Glassfish, hatchetfish, groupers—maybe you’ll be lucky and see a shark. I’ll signal when it’s time to come back up. Any questions?”

Alex shook his head.

“Then let’s do it.”

Alex drew his mask over his face, checked his respirator one last time, then sat on the edge of the boat with his hands crossed over his chest. Kolo gave him a thumbs up and he tipped over backwards, splashing down into the sea. It was a moment which he always enjoyed, feeling his shoulders pushing through the warm water, rolling in a cocoon of silver bubbles with the fractured light high above. Then his BCD, partly inflated, dragged him back to the surface. He was bobbing in the water, face to face with Kolo. The captain was watching them over the pulpit rail.

“All right?” Kolo shouted.

Alex gave him the universal diver’s sign: finger and thumb forming an O, the other three fingers pointing up. Everything OK.

Kolo responded with a clenched fist, thumb pointing down. Descend.

Alex released the air in his BCD and let his weight belt drag him down. The water rose over his chin, past his nose and eyes. Gently he began a controlled descent, listening to the sound of his own breathing amplified in his ears. It was only now that he remembered he had been operated on just three weeks ago.

What would Dr Hayward think about him scuba-diving? Well, at least it wasn’t something that had been forbidden.

A triggerfish—green with brilliant yellow stripes and a yellow tail—swam past, taking no notice of him.

The water was a deep tropical blue that became darker and murkier the further he descended. He looked at his depth gauge. Eleven metres, twelve metres, thirteen... He was comfortable, in full control. Kolo was a few metres above him, legs crossed. Great bubbles, each one containing a pearl of used air, rose in clusters to the surface.

And suddenly the Mary Belle was there, appearing in front of him as if projected onto a screen. It was always the same underwater. Objects, even ones as big as a sunken cargo ship, seemed to loom out of nowhere. Alex squeezed a little air into his BCD to slow his descent. He checked that he had neutral buoyancy, then he kicked forward and swam to examine this silent witness from the Second World War.

The Mary Belle lay in the sand, slanting to one side. It was in two halves, separated by a jagged, broken area that could have been made by a German torpedo. It was about a hundred and thirty metres long, twenty metres wide, the whole ship covered in algae and brightly coloured coral that would one day turn it into an extraordinary artificial reef. As he swam over the deck, heading for the stern, Alex looked down on the dark green surfaces, the twisting ladders and rails, the anchor winches and blast roof. He passed two railway freight cars lying side by side. Part of a locomotive lay shattered, a few metres away on the sand. At the far end he saw what had to be an anti-aircraft gun, now pointing helplessly at the seabed.

Once, the deck would have been full of life, with young marines running back and forth, the tannoy system barking orders, the wind and the sea spray blowing in their faces. But the Mary Belle had been hit. It had lain here for over half a century. There was nothing in the world more silent. It was the very definition of death.

Alex noticed Kolo signalling to him and he swam under the stern. He had disturbed a shoal of snappers which darted away, zigzagging rapidly out of sight. The propeller was directly above him. When the ship had broken in two, the stern had turned on its side, otherwise it would have been buried in the sand. Kolo signalled again. Are you all right? Alex glanced at his air supply. He had used 500 psi. He signalled back.

Fine.

Slowly they swam round the side of the wreck. Alex had his arms crossed over his chest, his hands clasping opposite arms. This was how he always dived. It helped retain body warmth and stopped him being tempted to touch anything. They rose up over the bridge and followed a ladder—each rung encrusted with new life—back to the upper deck. Kolo pointed at an opening beside one of the freight cars Alex had noticed. A hatchway, with a ladder leading down. It was the entrance to the second hold.

It seemed that Kolo wanted him to go in ahead of him. Alex took out his torch, then kicked down and cautiously swam through the opening, head and shoulders first. Wreck diving is entirely safe provided you know what you're doing, and Alex knew that the only real danger was getting his air pipes caught or slashing them on a sharp edge. The solution was to do everything very slowly, checking for any obstructions. But the hatch was easily wide enough for him. He followed the ladder down, turned on the torch and looked around him.

He was in a large, cavernous space which ran the full width of the ship and about twenty-five metres of its length. A ghostly green light streamed in through a series of small portholes and Alex flicked off the torch, realizing he wouldn't need it. The light illuminated an array of objects instantly recognizable even after sixty years beneath the sea. There was a Jeep, parked against a wall, a stockpile of Winchester rifles, a row of boots, a pair of motorcycles. It occurred to Alex that if he had come upon these on land, they would have been rusting and ugly, nothing more than junk. But their long stay underwater had given them a strange beauty. It was as if nature was trying to claim them and magically transform them into something they had never been.

Sound is also different underwater.

Alex heard the clang of metal hitting metal but for a moment he was unsure where it had come from, or indeed what it was. He glanced left and right but nothing was moving. Then he looked back the way he'd come. There was no sign of Kolo. Why hadn't the other man swum into the hold? Then Alex realized. The hatch that he had come through had been closed. It had swung shut—that was the sound he had heard.

He twisted round and swam back up the ladder. He wasn't wearing gloves and he was afraid of cutting himself, but when he reached the hatch he put his hand against it and pushed. It didn't budge.

It was so securely fastened it could have been cemented into place.

What the hell was going on? Alex felt the first stirrings of unease which could all too easily become panic.

But he knew the most important rule of scuba-diving was to remain calm, and he forced himself to breathe slowly, to take everything one step at a time. The support holding back the hatch must have broken. But it didn't matter. Kolo knew he was here. There was a dive ship directly overhead. He'd just have to find another way out.

Alex backed away from the hatch and swam the length of the hold. He came to a steel wall on the other side of the truck, and although it was pitted with holes, some big enough to get an arm through, there was no way the rest of his body would be able to follow. But there was a door—and it was ajar. Once it would have allowed the crew access from one hold to another. Now it was the exit that Alex needed. He swam over to it and pushed. The door opened about five centimetres but no more. It had been chained shut on the other side. Alex saw something glint. The chain was brand new. That was when he really began to worry.

A new chain on an old door. It could only be there for one reason. Somehow Drevin had found out who he was. Alex had thought he was so clever, eavesdropping with his iPod and snooping round the island. But he had let them put him on a boat and take him out to sea. He had done exactly what they wanted, swimming down into this death trap. And now they had locked the door. They were going to leave him here to drown.

Fury, black and irresistible, surged through him. His heart was thundering; he couldn't breathe. For a brief moment he was tempted to take the regulator out of his mouth and scream. He was helpless. At the mercy of a single pipe and a diminishing supply of air.

The next ninety seconds were possibly the most difficult of Alex's life. He had to fight for control, twenty-two metres below sea level, aware that he was quite probably in his tomb. Somehow he had to channel his anger away from himself, back towards Drevin, who had dealt with him as ruthlessly as anyone else who had ever crossed his path.

Another sound. An engine overhead. Alex felt a flicker of hope but quickly clamped down on it. It wasn't the sound of someone coming to rescue him. Kolo had returned to the surface. He had done his job and now he was leaving.

Sure enough, the noise faded and died away.

Alex was alone.

There was one thing he had to know, although he dreaded looking. He reached down for his instrument console. How much air had he used? The needle told him the worst. He had 1,750 psi left. At 500 psi, the gauge turned red. At that point, a spring-operated shut-off valve inside the tank's J-valve would close. He would have a few minutes left. And then he would die.

When he was sure he was back in control, he swam forward again. Alex knew that at this depth, he would soon get through what air he had left. But moving too fast, using too much energy, would only quicken the process. How long did he have? Fifteen minutes at most. Already he knew that his situation was hopeless, and he forced himself to ignore the dark whispers in his mind. Nobody knew he was here. There was no way out. But he still had to try. Better people than Drevin had tried to kill him and failed. He was going to find a way out.

The hatch was sealed shut. The windows were too small. The floor, the ceiling and the walls were solid.

There was just the single door that might lead him to safety, and that was chained. Alex looked around, then picked up one of the Winchesters. There was no chance it would fire after all these years

underwater, but it might still do. Carrying the old rifle, he swam over to the door and, holding onto the stock, slid the barrel through. He would use it as a crowbar. Maybe he could prise the door open; the chain was new but it was attached to a handle that was old and might be rotten. Using all his strength, Alex pulled. Briefly he thought he could feel the metal giving. He pulled harder and jerked back as something snapped. The rifle.

He had broken the barrel in half.

He swam over to the pile and picked up another. He could feel his gauges dragging behind him, but he didn't look at them again. He was too afraid of what he would see. He could hear his every breath; it echoed in his ears. And every time he opened his mouth he could see his precious-air supply disappearing in a cloud of bubbles. He was hearing and seeing his own death. It was being carefully measured out all around him.

The second rifle broke just as the first had done. For a moment, Alex went mad. He grasped the door with his hands and wrenched at it as if he could tear it off its hinges. Bubbles exploded around his head.

Blackness swirled around his eyes. When he calmed down, little had changed. His fingers were white, and he had cut the palm of one hand.

And his air supply had dropped to 900 psi. Only minutes left.

He had to move fast. No, moving fast would only bring the end closer. But there had to be another way out. He examined the windows again. The largest of them was irregular in shape—some of the metal had worn away. Alex could just about fit his head and half his shoulder through the gap. But that was it. Even if he took off his tank, his waist and hips would never make it through. He jerked back, fearful that he was going to get stuck and cut through his own air pipe. He hadn't achieved anything.

And his supply was now down to 650 psi. The needle was only a millimetre above the red.

Alex was cold. He had never been so cold in his life. The wetsuit should have been trapping some warmth for him but his hands and arms were turning blue. There was no sunlight in the hold. He was at the bottom of the sea. But it was more than that. Alex knew he was going to die. He would be found floating in this hellish place, surrounded by rusting machinery and memories of a war long over. This time there was no way out.

500 psi.

How had that happened? Had he somehow missed the last two minutes—two precious minutes when he had so few left? Alex forced himself to think. Was there anything else in the hold that he could use? Maybe the ship had been carrying artillery shells. He had seen an anti-aircraft gun on the deck. Could he perhaps blow his way out of here?

He began to search desperately for ammunition. As he did so he felt something in his throat and knew that it was becoming more difficult to breathe. His air supply was finally running out. He wondered if he would faint before he drowned. It seemed completely unfair. By a miracle, he had survived an assassin's bullet in London. And was it just for this? For another even worse death just a few weeks later?

Something grey flashed past one of the windows. A large fish. A shark? Alex felt a sense of total despair.

Even if by some miracle he did find a way out, the creature would be waiting for him. Perhaps it already knew he was there. In just a few brief seconds, his situation had become doubly hopeless.

But then he saw the grey shape again and with a shock of disbelief realized that it wasn't a shark at all. It was a diver in a wetsuit.

Someone was looking for him.

He had to force himself not to cry out. He kicked hard with his fins and reached the last window just as the diver was about to swim by. Alex's arm pushed through the jagged gap and he caught hold of the diver's leg. The diver twisted round.

Brown hair floating loose. Blue eyes full of worry behind the mask that covered them. The diver hovered on the other side of the window, and Alex recognized Tamara Knight.

Desperately he made the distress signal that he had been taught years before, chopping with his hand in front of his throat. Out of air. Help! He was finding it more and more difficult to breathe, straining to draw what was left in his tank, aware that his lungs were never more than half filled. Tamara reached into the pocket of her BCD and pulled something out. She passed it through the window. Alex was confused. He was holding one of Paul Drevin's inhalers. What good was that? Then he realized she must have taken it from his room. It was the gadget Smithers had given him in New York. How had she known about it?

And would it work underwater?

Dizzy, barely in control, Alex swam over to the chained door. He had to struggle to remember how the inhaler worked. Twist the cylinder twice clockwise. Why hadn't Tamara set it off herself? Of course, she couldn't. It was fingerprint sensitive. Alex had to do it. Breathe! Now the inhaler was armed. He rested it on the chain, then swam back further into the hold.

10 psi. The needle on his air gauge didn't have much further to travel.

The door blew open. There was a ball of flame, instantly extinguished, and Alex felt the shock wave hit him, throwing him against the truck. He wasn't breathing any more; there was nothing left to breathe.

Where was Tamara? Alex had assumed that there was a way out through the next hold, but what if he was wrong?

Everything was going black. Either the blast had knocked him out or he was suffocating.

But then he felt Tamara's arms around him. She was pulling his regulator out of his mouth. It was useless, and he let it go. He felt something touch his lips and realized she had given him a second regulator, the octopus attached to her own tank. He breathed deeply and felt the rush of air into his lungs. It was a wonderful sensation.

They stayed where they were for a few minutes, their arms wrapped around each other. Then Tamara gently nudged Alex on the shoulder and pointed up. He nodded. They were still a long way down and with the two of them sharing a single tank, it wouldn't be long before Tamara's air supply also ran out.

Tamara swam through the broken door and Alex followed. There was an open hatch and they slipped through it, travelling slowly up. They paused when their gauges showed five metres. This was the

safety stop that would allow nitrogen to seep out of their bloodstream and prevent them from getting the bends.

Five minutes later they completed their ascent, breaking through the surface into the brilliant afternoon sun.

Alex had no air to inflate his BCD, so he unfastened his weight belt and let it fall. Then he tore off his mask.

“How...?” he began.

“Later,” Tamara said.

It was a long swim back to the island and Tamara wanted to make sure they weren't seen. They allowed the current to carry them round Little Point, then kicked in for the shore behind the house. Tamara checked there were no guards in sight before they ran across the beach and into the shelter of the palm trees.

Alex heaved off his tank and threw himself down onto the ground. He lay there panting. Tamara was lying next to him. In her wetsuit, with her hair loose and water trickling down her face, she didn't look anything like a personal secretary ... and suddenly Alex realized that she had never really been one.

“That was too close for comfort,” she said.

Alex stared at her. “Who are you?” he asked. But already he knew the answer. “CIA.”

Of course. Joe Byrne had told him he had someone on the island.

“I'm sorry I've had to be so unfriendly to you,” Tamara said. She gave him a dazzling smile, as if it was something she had been wanting to do all along. “I'm sure you understand. It was my cover.”

“Sure.” It all made sense. “How did you find me just now?” he asked.

“You'd already told me where you were going,” Tamara explained. “I don't know why, but I was nervous and I decided to follow you. I went into your room and grabbed the inhaler. I thought it might be useful and I was right. Then I swam out. I was just nearing the site of the wreck, when I saw the boat heading back without you and I guessed what must have happened. So I came down to find you.”

“Thank you.” Alex was feeling drowsy. The late afternoon sun was beating down on him and he was already dry. “So what happens now?” he asked.

“You tell me.”

“I think Drevin may be planning to leave tonight.” Quickly Alex told her about the phone call he had overheard.

But Tamara looked doubtful. “I can't believe that,” she said. “The launch tomorrow ... Ark Angel. It means everything to him. He's been working on it for months. Why disappear now?”

“I agree. But he definitely mentioned a boat. It's arriving at eleven o'clock.”

“Then we have to be there. There's a backup unit waiting in Barbados. If Drevin tries to leave, we can contact them and they'll be here in minutes.”

“What do we do until then?”

“You’d better wait here. I’ll go back to the house and get you some clothes. And something to eat and drink.” She studied Alex closely. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine. Thanks, Tamara. You saved my life.”

“It’s great to be working with you, Alex. Joe told me all about you.”

Tamara slipped away, leaving Alex on his own. He watched the waves breaking gently on the white sand.

The sun was beginning to set and the first shadows were already stretching out, reaching towards Alex and silently warning him of the dangers of the coming night.

TROPICAL STORM

At ten o'clock that night, Alex and Tamara were waiting on the edge of the rainforest, looking down the track towards the wooden cabins where the guards got washed and changed. Both of them were dressed in dark clothes. Tamara had picked out combat trousers and a long-sleeved black T-shirt for Alex. He was too hot.

The night had brought with it a clammy heat that clung to his skin, and he could feel the sweat snaking down his back. But this way there was less chance of being seen, and he was protected from the worst of the mosquitoes.

Tamara was also in black. From somewhere she had produced a gun, a slim Beretta, which she was wearing in a holster under her arm. She also had a radio transmitter with which she was planning to contact the CIA back-up team—although she was worried about the reception. The clouds were thick, obscuring the moon, and it looked as if it was going to rain. Getting a decent signal in the middle of a tropical storm wouldn't be easy.

Alex was glad she was with him. He had been alone too long and it seemed to him that the two of them were well suited. Tamara had told him that she was one of the youngest agents working for Joe Byrne; she had been recruited when she was just nineteen. She didn't look much older than that now, crouched beside a giant flamboyant, the umbrella-shaped tree common to much of the eastern Caribbean. He sensed that this was one big adventure for her. Maybe that was the difference between them. She enjoyed her work.

There were three cabins, connected by covered walkways, beside the track. They were fairly primitive: dark wooden planks for walls, roofs made from palm fronds. About twenty metres further down, Alex could make out the electric gate and the checkpoint guarding the launch area on the other side. There were three guards on constant patrol, one of them inside the control box, the other two shuffling back and forth in front of the ten metre high metal fence. The whole area was illuminated by a series of arc lights shining down from metal watchtowers. Alex could see hundreds of moths and mosquitoes dancing in the beams.

The guards were relieved at ten fifteen. As Drevin's personal assistant, Tamara had been able to see the roster and she knew that the second night watch would be arriving at any moment. Alex glanced back down the track in the direction of Drevin's house. He thought briefly of Paul. Presumably he would have been told that Alex had drowned ... a terrible accident. He wondered what Paul would be thinking, and he was sorry that Tamara hadn't seen him when she'd gone back to the house to fetch him some clothes.

But he couldn't worry about that now. It was time. The track was still empty; there was no sign of any electric buggies coming either way. Tamara nudged him and he crept forward, keeping close to the undergrowth, making his way to the first of the three cabins. Very carefully he opened the door. There had been no sound or movement for twenty minutes, but even so there could still be someone asleep in there.

The cabin was empty. Alex slipped inside and found himself in a small, rectangular space. There were a couple of old sofas, a fridge and a table with empty beer bottles, some pornographic magazines and a deck of playing cards strewn across the surface. A fan stood in one corner but it was switched off. The room reeked of stale cigarette smoke, and the air was sluggish and still.

He passed through this cabin and into the next, an even smaller one with four shower cubicles and a row of wooden benches. The floor was tiled. Damp towels hung on hooks. Again, there was nobody in sight.

It was in the third cabin that he found what he was looking for. This was where the guards got changed for work. Uniforms, freshly ironed, hung in metal lockers; polished boots were neatly lined up against the wall. Exactly as Tamara had described.

Alex couldn't help smiling to himself as he reached into his pocket and took out the bottle that Smithers had given him. He glanced at the name on the label—STINGO—then opened it and sprinkled the contents over the guards' uniforms. The liquid was colourless and didn't smell of anything. The guards wouldn't have any idea what was about to hit them.

He heard a low whistle from outside: a warning from Tamara. There was a second door leading out of the cabin and Alex slipped through it into the darkness. Outside, he heard an approaching buggy. Perfect timing.

It was the changing of the guard. As Alex rejoined Tamara, a buggy drew up and three men dressed in baggy shorts and T-shirts got out. Alex recognized one of them. It was Kolo, the diver who had left him to die. He was pleased. If anyone deserved to suffer, it was Kolo.

“Is this going to work?” Tamara whispered as the three men disappeared into the changing room.

“Don't worry,” Alex replied. “Smithers has never let me down.”

About five minutes later, the three men reappeared, now dressed in their grey overalls. Alex and Tamara watched as they approached the checkpoint to swap places with the three guards there. They exchanged a few words in low voices, then took up their positions. The three who had been relieved went back into the cabin to change and drove off in the buggy a few minutes later.

“Let's get closer,” Alex whispered. He was keen to see whatever was going to happen.

Kolo was sitting in the control box, in front of a bank of telephones and monitors. The window was open so that he could communicate with the other two, who were now armed and standing together in front of the fence. It was a thankless task, Alex thought, hanging around all night, waiting for something to happen.

And although none of them knew it, it was about to get worse.

Alex noticed it first. The cloud of insects visible in the beams of the arc lamps had thickened. Before there had been hundreds of them. Now there were thousands. It was impossible to tell what kind of bugs they were: beetles, flies, cockroaches or mosquitoes. They were just black specks made up of frantically beating wings, antennae and dangling legs. There were so many that the light was almost obliterated.

Kolo slapped his face. The sound was surprisingly loud in the thick heat of the night. One of the other guards muttered something and scratched under his arm. Kolo slapped his face a second time, then the

back of his neck. The other men were beginning to shuffle around edgily, as if performing a weird dance.

One ran the stock of his machine gun down his chest, then reached over his shoulder, using it to scratch his back. Inside the control box, Kolo was swatting at the air in front of his face. He seemed to be having trouble breathing, and Alex could see why. The air all around him had been invaded by thousands and thousands of insects. Kolo couldn't open his mouth without swallowing them.

The mosquito lotion that Smithers had created was awesome. Every insect on the island had been attracted to the three unfortunate men. The two outside were out of control, slapping themselves, whimpering, jerking around like electric shock victims. Kolo screamed. Alex could see a huge centipede clinging to his neck. Very little of the man's skin was visible now. He was covered in a mass of biting, stinging insects.

They were crawling into his eyes and up his nose. Still screaming, he punched himself frenziedly. The other two men were doing the same.

There was a small explosion and a shower of sparks as one of the television monitors, invaded by insects, short-circuited. It was the final straw. Blind and swearing, Kolo staggered to his feet and tumbled out of the control box. The other two guards fell onto him, clinging to him for support, and the three of them began to grope their way towards the showers and the changing room.

A huge cloud of insects followed them.

Suddenly everything was silent.

"You were right," Tamara observed. "Your Mr Smithers is pretty good."

The two of them hurried past the now deserted checkpoint, through the gate and along the track on the other side. The rainforest soon ended and they could make out the gantries with the rockets ahead. There was still no moon.

Tamara looked up. "We're going to get wet," she announced.

She was right. A few minutes later, the clouds opened and they were instantly drenched. The rain was warm and fell from the sky as if poured from an enormous bucket. A sheet of lightning pulsed over the sea, reflected in the ground that was being churned up all around them. Everything had become black and white.

"What will happen to the launch?" Alex shouted. There was no longer any need to whisper. Tamara could hardly hear him against the crashing rain.

She shook water out of her eyes and shouted back, "It won't make any difference. The rain won't last long.

Everything will be dry by tomorrow morning."

In fact, the storm couldn't have broken at a better time. The launch area was a quarter of a mile of completely open land and Alex had wondered how they would cross it without being seen. He had no doubt that there would be other guards on patrol and probably closed-circuit TV. The rain provided perfect cover. In their dark clothes, he and Tamara were invisible.

The second jetty was on the western point of the island, connected to the rocket gantries and the various control buildings by a white cement track. Alex and Tamara were jogging towards it when a light suddenly burst out, cutting through the rain. It was mounted on a boat that was heading towards the shore, fighting its way through the tumultuous waves.

“This way!” Tamara yelled and pulled Alex towards a brick outbuilding with a tangle of metal pipes and gauges outside. As they ran, she tripped. Alex managed to catch her before she fell, and a few moments later they were safely concealed behind a water tank. The jetty was right in front of them. Alex wondered if Drevin was about to appear.

The boat reached the jetty. The rain was coming down even more heavily and it was difficult to see what was happening. Someone jumped down with a rope. More figures appeared on the deck. Alex had thought that Drevin was planning his exit from the island, but it looked as if the boat had brought new arrivals—

people who didn’t want to be seen.

Alex heard a sound behind him and turned to see Magnus Payne and two guards drive down the track towards the boat. The ginger hair and lifeless skin of the island’s head of security were unmistakable even in a tropical storm. They reached the jetty and Payne got out. Four men climbed down from the boat. Alex grabbed hold of Tamara, shocked. He knew who the men were, even though he had never learnt their real names.

Combat Jacket. Spectacles. Steel Watch and Silver Tooth.

Force Three had come to Flamingo Bay. But why? What did it mean? Magnus Payne was shaking their hands, welcoming them. This was the terrorist group that had sworn to destroy Drevin. But they were being greeted like old friends.

And then a voice crackled out of the storm, amplified by hidden speakers, echoing all around.

“Do not fire! We know you are there. Drop your weapons and come out with your hands up.”

The five men froze. Two of them pulled out guns. But the words weren’t being addressed to them.

If Alex had any doubts that it was he and Tamara who were being targeted, they were dispelled a few seconds later. Four more buggies had come racing out of the rain. They slid to a halt, facing him, their headlights dazzling him. A dozen black shadows came tumbling out and took up positions around them.

Next to him Tamara tensed, then sprang into action, drawing her gun. There was a single shot, fired from one of the buggies. Tamara cried out. Her gun spun away. Blood began to seep from a wound in her shoulder, spreading rapidly down her sleeve.

“That was your last warning!” the voice boomed. “Stand up and move slowly forward. If you resist, you will be shot.”

How had they been found? Alex thought back and remembered Tamara stumbling. A tripwire. That had to be it. As they had run, she had triggered an alarm.

Magnus Payne pushed his way through the line of guards. The four members of Force Three followed. The whole area had been empty only minutes before; now it was swarming. Tamara was clutching her wounded shoulder. Alex stood next to her, sick at heart.

And then Nikolei Drevin appeared, dressed in a light raincoat and—bizarrely—holding a brightly coloured golfing umbrella that shielded him from the downpour. He seemed relaxed, as if he'd simply decided to go for a late-night stroll. He stood in front of Alex and Tamara. There was very little emotion in his face.

“Miss Knight,” he said, and although he spoke softly, the words carried even above the sound of the rain.

“I always did have my doubts about you. Or rather, I suspected that the CIA would try to infiltrate my operation, and you seemed the most likely choice. How very sad I am to have my fears confirmed.”

“The boy...” Magnus Payne had reached Drevin's side.

“Yes. It seems your man didn't quite finish the job.” Drevin stepped forward until he was centimetres away from Alex. Alex didn't flinch; rain streamed down his face. “Tell me, Alex,” Drevin asked. “I'd be interested to know who you're working for. Is it MI6 or the CIA? Or perhaps both?”

“Go to hell,” Alex replied quietly.

“I'm truly sorry that you chose to make yourself my enemy,” Drevin continued. “I liked you from the start.

So did Paul. But you have abused my hospitality, Alex. A great mistake.”

Alex was silent. Next to him Tamara had gone very pale. She had one hand clamped over her wound and was obviously in pain. But she was still defiant. “The CIA know we're here, Drevin,” she said. “You do anything to us, they're going to be crawling all over you. You're not getting away; you've got nowhere to go.”

“Whatever made you think I was planning to go anywhere?” Drevin retorted. “Lock the girl up,” he ordered. “I don't want to see her again. Magnus—bring Alex Rider to the main hangar. I want to talk to him.”

Drevin turned and walked away. It only took three paces and he had disappeared into the rain.

PRIMARY TARGET

The main hangar was huge. Perhaps this was where the Cessna was kept when it wasn't in use. The roof was a great curve of corrugated iron. One wall slid back to allow access to the launch site. There were various pieces of machinery and a few oil drums scattered around, but otherwise the hangar was bare. Alex was tied to a wooden chair. Drevin was sitting opposite; Magnus Payne was standing beside him. Combat Jacket, Silver Tooth, Spectacles and Steel Watch were grouped together a short distance away. They had been invited to the party but it was clear that Drevin didn't expect them to join in.

The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had started. Alex could hear the water stilt gurgling in the gutters and there were a few last drops pattering on the roof. The air in the hangar was warm and damp. He was soaked. Payne had used a length of electrical wire to bind him to the chair and it was cutting into his flesh.

His hands and feet were numb.

Drevin was wearing a light blue cashmere jersey and cords. He was relaxed, holding a giant brandy glass in one hand, two centimetres of pale golden liquid forming a perfect circle in the bottom. He raised it to his nose and sniffed appreciatively.

"This is a Louis XIII cognac," he said. "It's thirty years old. A single bottle costs more than a thousand pounds. It's the only cognac I drink."

"I knew you were rich," Alex said. "I also knew you were greedy. But I didn't know you were boring as well."

"There are five men here who would be only too glad to deal with you if I were to allow it," Drevin replied mildly. "Perhaps you would do better to keep your mouth shut and listen to what I have to say."

He swirled the brandy and took a sip.

"I have to confess, I'm fascinated by you." The grey eyes studied Alex closely. "When Magnus told me you were an MI6 agent, I laughed. I simply couldn't believe it. But when I look back over everything that's happened, it makes perfect sense. I met Alan Blunt once and thought him a most devious and unpleasant individual. This confirms my impression. Even so, I find it hard to accept that he sent you after me. Is that what happened, Alex? Were you planted from the very start?"

"He'd been shot," Payne growled. "I've seen copies of his hospital records. That was real enough."

"Then perhaps it was no more than an unhappy coincidence. Unhappy, that is, for you. But I'm glad we have this time together. Although I'm afraid that both you and Miss Knight must be dispensed with soon, at least I've been given the opportunity to explain myself to you. You see, Alex, I'd like Paul to know about me. I'd like to tell him everything I'm about to tell you. But he's weak. He's not ready yet. He might even end up hating me for what I am. But you, I know, will understand."

Drevin lowered his nose into the glass and breathed in deeply.

“I am, as you mentioned just now, a rich man. One of the richest men on the planet. I employ a team of accountants who work for me full-time all the year round, and even they are unsure quite how much I am worth. You have no idea what it’s like, Alex, to be able to have anything you want. I can walk into a shop to buy a suit and decide instead to buy the shop. If I see a new car or ship or plane in a magazine, it can be mine before the end of the day. At the last count I had eleven houses around the world. I can sleep in a different country every day of the week and wake up in yet another little bit of paradise.

“Of course, as you’ve probably been told, this wealth did not come to me in a way that you might describe as honest. Such terms are of no interest to me. I am a criminal; I freely admit it. I have killed many people personally and countless more have died as a result of my orders. Many of my associates are criminals.

Why should this trouble me? There’s not a successful businessman alive who has not at some time cheated or lied. We all do it! It’s just a question of degree.

“I have been hugely successful for the past twenty years, and I fully intend to become richer and more successful in the years to come. However”—Drevin’s face grew dark—“about eighteen months ago I became aware of two small problems, and these have forced me into a particular course of action. They are the reason why you are here now, Alex. They are problems that could all too easily destroy me and which I have spent a great deal of time and money seeking to overcome.”

“Why are you telling me all this if you’re planning to kill me?” Alex asked.

“It is because I’m planning to kill you that I can tell you,” Drevin replied. “There will be no danger of you repeating what you hear. But please don’t interrupt again, Alex, or I shall have to ask Magnus to hurt you.”

He closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, he was fully composed.

“The first problem,” he said, “concerns the State Department of the United States, which decided to investigate some of my financial dealings, particularly those involving the Russian mafiya. Of course, I have been aware right from the start that they were building a case against me. I have always been a careful man. I avoid written evidence and make sure there are no witnesses who might incriminate me. But even so, it would not be possible to act on the scale that I do without leaving some trace of myself, and I knew that the Americans were squirreling away the bits and pieces, talking to anyone who’d ever met me

—and that sooner or later they were planning to bring me to court.

“The obvious solution to this seemed to be to destroy the US State Department and in particular the men and women whose job it had been to meddle in my affairs. It occurred to me that in one respect they were actually being quite helpful. They had gathered all the evidence together: a case of putting all their eggs in one basket! With a single, well-aimed missile, I could kill all the investigators and destroy all the tapes, files, scraps of paper, telephone records, computer printouts—everything! I could begin again with a completely clean sheet. The more I thought about it, the more grateful I became to the Americans for what they were doing.

“Of course, it wasn’t going to be easy. Because, you see, the investigation was based in one of the most secure buildings in the world—the Pentagon in Washington. The place is nothing more than a huge slab of concrete—and much of it underground. It employs an anti-terrorist force that operates twenty-four hours a day. Every form of monitoring device you could imagine can be found there, and since 9/11, no commercial plane can get anywhere near. The Pentagon is thoroughly protected against chemical, biological and radiological attack. I know, because I considered them all. But even a brief examination showed me that any such approach was doomed to failure.

“And now, if you’ll permit me, I’ll move on to the second problem that I mentioned. It may seem completely unrelated to the first. For a long time, I thought it was. But you will see in a minute how it all connects.”

Alex said nothing. He was aware of Magnus Payne and the men who made up Force Three watching him.

He was still wondering how they fitted into all this. And where was Kaspar, the man with the tattooed skull? Even now, nothing quite added up. Alex shifted in the chair, trying to get some feeling back into his hands and feet.

“My other problem was Ark Angel,” Drevin went on. “Space tourism has always interested me, Alex, and when the British government approached me to go into partnership with them, I must confess I was flattered. I would benefit from the money they would put into the project. I would be at the forefront of one of the most challenging and potentially profitable enterprises of the twenty-first century. And it would provide me with the one thing I most needed: respectability! The Americans might view me as a criminal, but it would give them pause for thought when they saw that I was having supper with the Queen. It occurred to me that they might find it rather more difficult to drag me off to prison when I was Sir Nikolei Drevin. Or even Lord Drevin. Sometimes it helps to have the right contacts.

“And so I agreed to become partners with your government in the Ark Angel project, the world’s first space hotel. It’s above us right now. It’s always above us. And I can never forget it. Because, you see, it has become a nightmare, a catastrophe. Even without the Americans and their investigation, Ark Angel could easily destroy me.”

Drevin frowned and took a large sip of brandy.

“Ark Angel is billions of pounds over budget. It’s sucking me dry. Even with all my wealth I can no longer support it. And it’s all the fault of your stupid government. They can’t make a decision without talking about it for months. They have committees and subcommittees. And when they do make a decision, it’s always the wrong one. I should have known from the start. Look at the Scottish parliament! The Millennium Dome! Everything the British government builds costs ten times as much as it should and doesn’t even work.

“Ark Angel is the same. It’s late, it’s leaking and it’s lost any hope of ever being completed. The whole thing is falling apart. And for months now I’ve been thinking, if only the wretched thing would simply fall out of the sky. I could scrape back at least some of my money because, like every major project, it is insured. More than that, I’d be able to wipe my hands of it. I’d be able to wake up without having it, quite literally, hanging over my head. There were days when I seriously considered

paying someone to blow it up.

“And that, Alex, is when I had my big idea. It’s as I told you. Two problems that came together with one single solution.”

Drevin leant forward and at last Alex saw quite clearly the madness in his eyes.

“I wonder how much you know about physics, Alex. Even as we sit here now, there are hundreds of objects orbiting above us in outer space, from small communications satellites to giant space stations such as the ISS and Mir before that. Have you ever wondered what keeps them there? What stops them from falling down?”

“Well, the answer is a fairly simple equation consisting of their speed balanced against their distance from the earth. You might be amused to know that, theoretically, it would be possible for a satellite to orbit the earth just a few metres above your head. But it would have to go impossibly fast. Ark Angel is three hundred miles away. It’s therefore able to maintain its orbital velocity at just seventeen and a half thousand miles per hour. But even so, every few months it has to be reboosted. The same was true for Mir when it was in orbit, and for the International Space Station now. Every few months, rockets which are known as progress vehicles have to push all these large satellites back into space. Otherwise they’d come crashing down.

“In fact, some of them do exactly that. The Russian space probe Mars 96 fell out of the sky on 17 November 1996 and the pieces rained down across South America. In April 2000 the second stage of a Delta rocket narrowly missed Cape Town. The world has been very lucky that so far there has been no major catastrophe. Well, almost three quarters of the planet is water. There are huge deserts and mountain ranges.

The chances of a piece of space junk hitting a populated area are relatively small. Even so, most astronomers would agree, it is an accident waiting to happen.

“Are you finding this hard to follow? I’ll make it easy for you. Imagine swinging a conker on a piece of string around your hand. If you slow down, the conker will fall and hit your hand. And there you have it.

The conker is the space station; your hand is the earth. It doesn’t take a great deal to cause one to crash into the other.

“And that is exactly what I intend to do.

“Tomorrow, when Gabriel 7 blasts off, it will be carrying a bomb which has been exactly timed and which must be exactly positioned within Ark Angel. Everything has been worked out on computers and the program is locked in. If you look at a map, you will find that Washington is positioned at around thirty-eight degrees north. The angle of inclination followed by Ark Angel—its flight path—is also thirty-eight degrees. This means that every time it orbits the earth, it passes directly over Washington.

“The bomb will go off two hours after Gabriel 7 has docked with Ark Angel—at exactly half past four. This will have the effect of knocking Ark Angel out of its orbit. The space station will begin to topple towards the earth. It will enter the earth’s atmospheric drag and after that things will begin to happen very quickly.

The more atmosphere that surrounds it, the faster it will fall. Soon it will be tumbling—out of control. Or that is how it will seem. In fact, I have secretly programmed what are known as de-orbit manoeuvres into Ark Angel. Although it will seem to be moving haphazardly, it will be as accurate as an independently targeted nuclear missile.

“Can you imagine it, Alex? Ark Angel weighs about seven hundred tonnes. Of course, much of it will burn up as it re-enters the earth’s atmosphere. But I estimate that about sixty per cent of it will survive. That’s about four hundred tonnes of molten steel, glass, beryllium and aluminium travelling at around fifteen thousand miles an hour. The Pentagon is the primary target. The building will be destroyed. All the people working there will die, and every last scrap of information will be incinerated. I rather suspect that the shock wave will destroy most of Washington too. The Capitol. The White House. The various monuments.

The parks. A shame, because I’ve always thought it a rather attractive city. But very little of it will be left.”

Alex closed his eyes. Jack Starbright was in Washington, visiting her parents. Maybe she would survive the hideous explosion that Drevin had planned. But thousands of people—hundreds of thousands—would not. Once again Alex found himself wondering how he had got himself into this. Had it really all begun with a doctor ordering him two weeks’ R & R?

“And now I must tell you about Force Three,” Drevin said.

“You don’t need to,” Alex replied. He had worked this part out for himself. “You need someone to take the blame. Force Three don’t exist. You invented them.”

“Exactly.” Drevin waved his glass at the four men standing near by. “I consider Force Three to be the most brilliant aspect of the entire operation. Obviously, if Ark Angel is sabotaged, if it falls on the Pentagon, I will be the main suspect. So I had to create a scapegoat. I had to make sure that I was above suspicion.

“I created Force Three. I hired the men you see here now. Under my instructions, they committed several acts of terrorism that seemed to be directed against capitalist concerns. They blew up a car manufacturing plant in Dakota, a factory in Japan, a GM research centre in New Zealand. I also paid a journalist working in Berlin and a lecturer in London to speak out against Force Three, to warn the world about them. I then promptly had them murdered. Do you see? I was creating the illusion of a ruthless group of eco-warriors who hated anyone involved in big business—and who particularly hated me.”

“You kidnapped your own son!” Alex exclaimed. At last the events at the hospital and Hornchurch Towers were beginning to make sense.

“I told you. I had to be seen to be above suspicion. The world had to believe that Force Three were my enemy. What sort of father would allow his own son to be kidnapped just days after an operation —”

“But they got it wrong,” Alex interrupted. “They took me instead of him.” He thought back to the time when he had been held prisoner and his head swam. “They were going to cut off Paul’s finger! Did you really order them to do that?”

“Of course.” For the first time, Drevin looked troubled. Alex could see him struggling with his emotions, forcing them down. “The threat had to be credible. If Paul had been maimed, nobody would have suspected that I had anything to do with it. And when Force Three attacked me here on Flamingo Bay, I would be the victim.”

“But that’s monstrous!” Alex protested. “He’s your son!”

“Maybe a little pain would have toughened him up,” Drevin retorted. “The boy is too soft. And one day he is going to inherit billions. The whole world will be his. Is one little finger too much to ask in return?”

“It must be great having you as a dad!” Alex sneered.

“You will die very painfully if you continue to speak to me in that way!” Drevin finished his brandy. He was suddenly flushed and out of breath. “The only mistake I made was not providing Kaspar with a photograph of Paul. We knew his room number; we knew there would be no security at the hospital. How could we know that another boy—you—would decide to get involved?”

“Is that why you tried to kill me in the fire?” Alex asked.

“No.” Drevin shook his head. “We needed you alive. That was the whole point. Paul had been saved from his ordeal but we still needed someone to tell the world that it was Force Three behind the kidnap attempt.

Killing you would have been no use to us at all. You were meant to escape. There was a chair in the room so that you could climb up through the ceiling and over the wall into the corridor. The fire was deliberately started away from the stairwell so that you could get out of the building.”

“But one of your people was waiting for me with a gun.” Alex looked at the man he knew only as Combat Jacket. This was the man who had shot the night receptionist at the hospital. He was gazing at Alex with watery eyes that were too small and too close to his broken nose.

Drevin was obviously hearing this for the first time. “Is this true?” he asked.

“He’s lying,” Combat Jacket said. It was the first time he had spoken. “I let him go like you said. I never went near him.”

Alex understood. He’d humiliated Combat Jacket. And the man had disobeyed orders to get his revenge.

He was the one who was lying. It was obvious to everyone there; they could hear it in his voice.

Drevin shrugged. “It makes no difference,” he said, and Combat Jacket relaxed. “You may be wondering why Force Three have come to the island, Alex. It’s because I have one last use for them. The launch is timed for nine o’clock tomorrow morning. The bomb will go off at half past four in the afternoon. And as Ark Angel comes crashing down on Washington, a fight will break out here on Flamingo Bay. Intruders will have been discovered. My men will shoot to kill. And when the authorities come calling and the investigation begins, I will be able to give them the final proof that Force Three were responsible. You have described the men who kidnapped you, Alex. Tomorrow their bullet-ridden bodies will be on display.”

Now it was Silver Tooth who spoke. Spectacles and Steel Watch were also looking uneasy. “How

are you going to fake that?" he asked.

Drevin smiled. "Who said I was going to fake it?"

The chatter of gunfire was so loud and so close that Alex nearly toppled over in the chair. The four fake terrorists didn't stand a chance. They were dead before they could react, blown off their feet onto the cold concrete floor. Alex twisted round. Magnus Payne was holding one of the Mini Uzis. There was a dreadful smile on his face. A cloud of smoke hovered around his hands.

"You're insane!" Alex spat out the words without knowing what he was saying. "You're never going to get away with it! They'll know it was you..."

"They may well suspect it was me, but it's going to be almost impossible to prove," Drevin retorted. "I'm afraid I'm the victim in all this."

"But what about me? What about Tamara? If you kill us, the CIA will come after you!"

"The CIA are already after me. What difference will another couple of bodies make? I'm afraid you and Miss Knight will be found on the beach. Accidentally caught in the crossfire. A terrible shame. But not my fault."

"And what about Kaspar?" Why had Alex thought of him? He was the one piece missing from this crazy jigsaw. If Force Three had been working for Drevin all along, then so had Kaspar. But where was he?

"Show him," Drevin ordered.

Magnus Payne put down the sub-machine gun. He reached up and took hold of his ginger hair. A wig. He pulled it off, then ripped at his skin. Alex should have recognized the latex. He had recently worn a similar disguise himself. He watched in dismay as the head of security seemed to tear his own face apart and the dreadful tattoos appeared underneath. In just a few seconds the magic trick was complete. Magnus Payne was gone; Kaspar stood in his place.

"The tattoos were rather painful and unpleasant," Drevin commented. "But we had to create a terrorist leader people would remember. I'd say we succeeded, wouldn't you?"

Alex felt utterly defeated. He remembered now his first meeting with Payne on Flamingo Bay. The head of security had disguised his voice, of course. But even so, Alex had been sure he'd seen him somewhere before. And Payne had known immediately who he was. Both he and Paul had been in the buggy when Drevin introduced them, and Payne was supposed to be meeting them both for the first time. But he had known immediately which was which. Of course. He had recognized Alex.

"We'll arrange the bodies on the beach after the launch," Drevin said to Kaspar. "And we'll add the boy and the woman then." He put down his glass and stood up. "Goodbye, Alex. I enjoyed meeting you very much. I would have liked to get to know you better. But I'm afraid we've reached the end."

He tugged at his ring one last time as if there was something he had forgotten to say. The men who had pretended to be Force Three, and whose names Alex would never know, lay sprawled on the floor.

Kaspar stepped forward and grabbed hold of the chair. Alex was helpless as his chair was tilted backwards and he was dragged away.

WIND AND WATER

Kaspar drove Alex across the compound to a flat, rectangular building with barred windows and a door with steps leading down, just below the level of the ground. Alex could no longer think of the other man as Magnus Payne. Drevin's head of security hadn't bothered to replace his wig or mask, and even in the darkness the hideous map of the world still glowed livid on his skin. Alex wondered how much he had been paid to disfigure himself. Whatever the sum, it would probably cost him just as much one day to pay for the laser surgery to remove the tattoos.

Alex had been untied from the wooden chair but his hands were still bound. As they got out of the buggy, he tested the wire, attempting to find some slack. It seemed to him that, given time, he might be able to free himself. Not that it would do him much good. The building in front of him looked like a prison. And Kaspar knew what he was capable of. He wasn't going to make any more mistakes.

They went down the steps into a large area filled with electronic equipment, computers and workstations.

A model of a space probe—gleaming steel with circuitry spilling everywhere—took up most of the room.

Alex noticed two sets of what looked like tracksuits hanging on a rail. They both had the Ark Angel logo stitched onto the sleeve. He supposed they must be the outfits worn by astronauts.

“This way,” Kaspar grunted. He gestured with his gun towards another flight of stairs leading down.

Alex obeyed and found himself in a wide corridor with two solid-looking cages on either side. As he stepped forward, he heard a screeching and jabbering from the first cage, and to his surprise an orang-utan bounded towards him, crashing its fists against the bars. Then he remembered. Drevin had said he was planning to send an ape into space—some sort of endurance experiment.

“Meet Arthur,” Kaspar said. There was an ugly smile on his face.

“Is he any relation?” Alex asked.

The remark earned him a sharp jab with the gun. But the pain was quickly forgotten. He had looked into the next cage and seen Tamara Knight, still very pale but alive. She smiled at Alex but said nothing while Kaspar opened the door of the cage opposite.

“In here,” he ordered.

Alex had no choice. He stepped inside and waited while Kaspar locked the door behind him. He looked around. The cage was about two metres square. The bars were solid steel. The lock was brand new. Alex had no gadgets on him and his hands were still tied. He was going nowhere.

Kaspar removed the key and slipped it into his pocket. “I'll leave the three of you together.” He glanced at his watch. It was almost one o'clock in the morning. “You'll hear the rocket launch,” he said. “And as soon as it's gone, someone'll come for you. They'll take you to the beach and that'll be

the end.” The corner of West Africa twisted in a grimace of pure hatred.

Alex had seen it all before. The bigger the criminals, the more they resented being beaten by a teenager.

And Alex had beaten Kaspar twice. “I’m just sorry I won’t be the one holding the gun,” Kaspar went on.

“But I’ll be thinking of you. I hope it won’t be too quick.”

He walked away. Alex heard his footsteps on the stairs. The main door opened and closed. Arthur the orang-utan stalked to the back of his cage and sat down.

“Charming guy,” Tamara muttered.

“Tamara, are you OK?” Alex had been worried about her, and he was relieved to see her now.

“I’ve been better,” she admitted. “Was that Magnus Payne just now?”

Alex nodded.

“I thought I recognized his voice. What happened to his head?”

Alex told her. He also told her about his meeting in the hangar and Drevin’s plan to destroy Washington.

Tamara was kneeling against the door of her cage, listening closely. When he finished talking she let out a deep sigh. It seemed to Alex that even more colour had drained from her face.

“We thought he was going to cut and run,” she said. “We thought he was finished. We never figured he was going to come up with something like this.”

“Can he really do it?” Alex asked.

Tamara thought for a moment, then nodded. “Maybe. I don’t know. He’d have to work everything out right down to the last second. The explosion. All the rest of it. But, yes... I’m afraid he probably can.”

“We have to contact Joe Byrne.”

“The guards took my radio transmitter. I imagine they’ll have taken your iPod too.”

“What about the phones?”

“There are radio phones on the island but Drevin will have disabled them, just in case. And ordinary mobiles are no good; you can’t get a signal. I don’t know, Alex. Either we’re going to have to stop him ourselves or one of us is going to have to go for help.”

“Barbados...”

“It’s only about ten miles from here. Ed Shulsky is waiting at Harrison Point; he’s got plenty of back-up.

Maybe you could steal a boat.”

“Why me? Why not both of us?”

Tamara shook her head. "I'm sorry, Alex. But I've got a bullet in my shoulder. I'd only slow you down."

Alex lashed out at the cage door with his foot. The bars rattled. It was obvious to him that he wasn't going anywhere, and he said so.

"Maybe I can help you," Tamara said. She was wearing trainers and as Alex watched, she reached down and pulled out the laces. "Catch!" She slipped her uninjured arm between the bars of her cage and threw the laces over to Alex.

"What—"

"You're not the only one with gadgets. There's tungsten wire inside the laces. Diamond-edged. You can cut through the bars."

"That's neat," he said, though secretly he wished that the CIA had come up with something less clumsy and perhaps a little more efficient.

"They removed my exploding earrings," Tamara added, as if reading his mind.

Alex took one of the laces and examined the door. The steel bars were strong but they were thin and he would only have to cut through three of them to squeeze through. His job wouldn't be made easier by the fact that his hands were tied, but perhaps he could deal with that too.

"How much time do we have?" he asked.

"Not much. It gets light around six, and if you're not out by then, I don't think you'll have much chance."

"Right."

Alex looped the lace over the wire between his wrists, then grabbed the dangling ends with his teeth. He pulled the lace tight and began to jerk his hands in a vague sawing motion. In less than a minute his wrists were free. He saw Tamara smile. Now he could begin work in earnest.

The bars weren't so easy. It took well over half an hour to make the first cut, and Alex was disappointed to discover that even after it had been severed near its base, the bar wouldn't bend. He had to make a second cut—another half-hour's work—before it finally fell to the floor with a clang. Alex cursed himself. If there were any guards upstairs, the noise would have alerted them. But he was lucky. Nobody came. It seemed that the two of them were on their own.

Tamara hadn't spoken while he was working but now she nodded at him. "Keep going!" she encouraged.

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. They took my watch."

That was the worst of it. As Alex started on the second bar, he had no idea how much time had passed. All he knew was that he was worn out. He needed to sleep. And he had blisters on his thumbs, his fingers and the heels of his hands where they had rubbed together.

The night dragged on. He sat hunched up in the cage, sawing back and forth. Tamara was watching

him.

The orang-utan had turned his back on both of them and seemed to be asleep.

At last it was done. The third bar came loose, leaving enough space for Alex to slip through into the corridor. He went over to Tamara.

“I’m going to get you out,” he said.

“No, Alex.”

“I can’t just leave you here.”

Tamara shook her head. “You don’t have a lot of time. Get to Barbados. Find Ed.” She leant back. Although she was trying not to show it, Alex could see that she was in a lot of pain. “I’ll be all right,” she went on.

“I’ve got Arthur to keep me company. Now go, before someone comes.”

Alex knew she was right. He picked up one of the loose bars and climbed back up the stairs. Looking through the window, he was alarmed to see streaks of pink light stealing across the inky sky. It must be well after six o’clock, less than three hours to the launch.

He went over to the door and opened it a crack. There was a guard sitting in a chair, wearing grey overalls and a cap. Alex smiled to himself. For once luck was on his side. The man was fast asleep. He gripped the metal bar more tightly. He had thought it might come in useful.

Ten minutes later, dressed in the guard’s uniform and with the cap pulled down low over his forehead, Alex drove an electric buggy back towards the checkpoint. Without slowing down, he held out the guard’s ID, angling his arm so that it covered most of his face. He was prepared to crash through the gate if he had to, and he was relieved when it opened to let him pass. It seemed that security on Flamingo Bay needed a serious overhaul. But then again, he and Tamara were supposed to be locked up. The place was an island, ten miles away from the nearest land. What was there for Drevin or anyone else to worry about?

The buggy was easy to drive, with only two pedals—accelerator and brake—and no gears. He put his foot down and sped through the rainforest, aware that the sky was getting lighter all the time. Drevin’s house and the far end of the island, Little Point, appeared in the distance. Alex turned the wheel and spun off the track, steering the buggy down between the palm trees towards the beach. It made it about halfway before it got stuck in the sand. That was good enough for Alex. He jumped out and ran down to the jetty.

There were two canoes and a boat moored there—a Princess V55 motor cruiser. A canoe would be too slow.

But the boat? It was a beautiful craft, very low in the water, its bow shaped like a knife, built for speed.

Alex looked for the key in the ignition. Why not? One guard had been asleep. Another hadn’t even looked at him as he drove past. A third might have made the clumsiest mistake of all.

But this time he was disappointed. There was no key. He searched all the cupboards and lockers in the main cabin, but there was nothing. Frustrated, Alex rested his hands on the wheel and forced

himself to think calmly. Drevin's house was in sight. He was tempted to steal in and try to get hold of a telephone. But Tamara had warned him that all the phones on the island would be disabled, and Alex believed her. Might he find a key to the Princess in the house? It was possible but the risk was too great. Alex looked up. The sky was brightening rapidly, the darkness trickling away like spilt ink. Dawn had broken. Drevin might wake up at any moment.

No phones. No boats. Barbados was ten miles away—too far to swim or to paddle in a canoe. Alex knew what he had to do. He had worked it out when he was sawing through the bars of the cage, but he'd hoped he would be able to find another way. Well, there was no other way. He might as well get on with it.

He jumped down from the boat and ran along the beach, making for the house. But he wasn't going in. Instead, he went round the back to the equipment store where Kolo had taken him before the dive. It occurred to Alex that he might find a key to the motor launch somewhere inside, but he wasn't going to waste any more time looking. The store was where Paul Drevin kept his power kite and board. That was what Alex had come for.

But even as he found the kite and began to bundle it out, he wondered if it would be possible. Ten miles was a long way, and after the storm the sea might be rough. At least there was a strong breeze. Alex had felt it when he was on the jetty—and it was also blowing offshore. Most kite boarders avoid an offshore wind; it's lumpy and difficult, and there's always a danger it will blow you out to sea. But that was exactly what Alex wanted. He needed to get away. Fast.

He reached for the board and at that moment the door swung open behind him. Alex was already spinning round, his fists raised, preparing for a karate strike, when Paul stepped inside.

"Alex?" The other boy had obviously only just got up. He was wearing shorts and nothing else. He stared at Alex, shocked. "What are you..." He couldn't find the words. "I thought you'd gone," he said.

"I'm afraid not." Alex wasn't sure how much Paul knew, and he didn't know what to say. He was aware that the whole situation had changed. Where did he go from here?

"What's happened to you?" Paul asked. "What are you doing here? And why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm sorry," Alex said. "I can't tell you." He desperately wished Paul hadn't found him. "How did you know I was here?"

"I couldn't sleep. I went to the window to get some air—and there you were, on the beach."

"Do you have a key to the boat? Do you know where it is?"

"No." All of a sudden Paul was angry. "Dad told me that you'd been sent here to spy on him. I said that couldn't be true, but he was sure of it. He said he had enemies in New York and they'd paid you to come here, to make trouble."

"Did he tell you what he did to me?" Alex cut in. He was getting angry himself. Here was Paul, accusing him. But he knew nothing.

“He said he put you on the plane out of here.” Paul looked at Alex uncertainly. “Is it true, Alex?” he demanded. “Are you spying on us?”

“I haven’t got time to talk about this now.” He took a step and Paul’s arm shot out, his hand reaching for a button built into a panel on the wall. Alex hadn’t noticed it before.

“This is an alarm,” Paul told him. “If I press it, there’ll be a dozen guards here in less than a minute. I want you to tell me the truth. What are you doing here? What’s been happening?”

“If you press that button, I’ll be killed.”

“You’re lying...”

“Your father will kill me, Paul. He’s already tried once.”

“No!” Paul was staring at Alex and now there was something else in his face. It wasn’t just disbelief. It was anger. And Alex understood. There was nothing he could say. He could tell Paul everything he knew about Nikolei Vladimir Drevin, and it would make no difference.

Drevin had lied to him. He had taunted him and shown him little affection. But he was still Paul’s father. It was as simple as that. And no matter what the feelings were between them, Paul would defend him.

Because he was Drevin’s son.

Alex knew that he had only seconds before Paul sounded the alarm. He raised his hands, palms upward, as if to prove that he meant no harm. “OK, Paul,” he said. “I’ll tell you everything.”

“Don’t come any closer...” Paul’s hand hovered centimetres from the alarm.

Alex risked another step forward. “It’s not what you think. Your dad was wrong about me. So are you.

Your mother asked me to come here.”

“What?”

Alex had mentioned Paul’s mother because he knew the effect it would have. Paul froze, uncertain, and in that split second, Alex lashed out, driving his elbow into the other boy’s temple. Paul crumpled instantly; Alex caught him and lowered him to the ground. He had been learning karate since he was six years old but this was the first time he had struck anyone the same age as himself. He felt ashamed. All Paul had ever wanted was a friend, someone he could look up to—and it had come to this. But what else could he do? He had to leave the island. He had to prevent a whole city from being destroyed.

He forced himself to ignore the unconscious boy, picked up the kite and the rest of the equipment and dragged it down to the beach. The sun was already well above the horizon. Alex pumped up the kite and laid it out along the shore, all the while looking out for any approaching guards. How long would he have before Paul came round? Fifteen minutes, perhaps twenty. No matter which way he looked at it, he was running out of time.

And there was still the problem of launching the kite. With two people it had been easy. On his own it would take more time. Quickly Alex stripped off the grey uniform; underneath he was wearing

swimming trunks. He picked up the harness and clipped it on. It was a Mystic Darkrider, made out of black rubber with a foam shell. Paul had chosen all the equipment himself and he'd made sure he'd got the best. If only he could have been here to help Alex with it.

How to do it?

Alex checked the wind direction, then laid the kite out on the ground with the lines stretching towards the water's edge. He scooped up several handfuls of sand and dumped them on the upwind tip of the kite. The other tip he left free.

He picked up the board and control bar and began to walk backwards into the sea. The water, surprisingly cold, lapped around his ankles. The kite, shaped like a crescent moon, was lying flat behind him. It was already flapping like a wounded animal, trying to rise up into the air. Only the sand was holding it down.

Alex laid the board down beside him and pulled one of the lines attached to the downwind tip, gently nudging it into the breeze. Almost at once it began to rise, and the kite inflated, the wind rushing through the vents. Alex stepped deeper into the water. The kite was pulling more strongly, the fabric jerking and throwing off the sand. And then, suddenly, it rose. Alex steered it carefully into the air and neutralized it above his head. It had taken him several minutes to get to this point and he was painfully aware of the time ticking away. But he had done it. He was ready to go.

He hooked the control bar to his harness and then stepped onto the board. Carefully he lowered the kite into the wind. Almost at once he felt the pull, fierce and irresistible. He leant back, letting it take him. He was powered up. A moment later, he was away.

The kite was flying in front of him, about fifteen metres above the sea. Despite everything, Alex experienced the same exhilaration that he had felt with Paul when the two of them were fooling around.

He seemed to be going incredibly fast.

The wind was rushing over him, the spray almost blinding him as it swept into his face. The sun was already hot; he could feel it beating down, warming his arms, chest and shoulders. If he was out here too long, he would burn. But Alex knew that was the least of his problems. Somehow he had to cover the ten miles. And Drevin would be coming after him very soon.

He was heading past Little Point; once round it he would find himself in less friendly waters. He eased the control bar, raising it slightly to slow himself down, then pulled on the two front lines, tilting it to the left.

The moment he rounded the headland, he felt the difference. The waves were suddenly much larger. The view ahead was obstructed by solid blue walls that rose up with alarming speed and threatened to come crashing down on him. Somehow he managed to climb them, one after another. But his arms, taking most of the strain, were already aching. And when he did catch a brief glimpse of the horizon, there was nothing on it, not even so much as a speck. Barbados was still a long way away.

Ten minutes passed. Alex was a good surfer but the experience was very different with a kite. All his concentration was fixed on the soaring black and white Flexifoil wing. If he allowed it to stray

outside the wind envelope, he knew it would fall into the sea. He would come to an immediate halt and it would be almost impossible to launch the kite again. He had to stay upright. He was exhausted from lack of sleep.

Ignore it. Stay focused. Gritting his teeth, he willed himself on.

The wind was coming at him sideways now, gusting at around thirty miles an hour. The spray was lashing into him. He wondered if he was going in the right direction and risked a glance behind him. Flamingo Bay was already small and distant. He figured that so long as he kept it over his left shoulder, he must be heading more or less straight.

He looked back again, and felt a sickening lurch in his stomach. He had to fight to keep his balance. He must have travelled at least five miles, he was sure of it. But there was still no sign of Barbados and the worst had happened.

He was being pursued.

Paul must have come round and raised the alarm. Either that or someone had spotted the kite and guessed what had happened. The Princess V55 was knifing through the water, its sleek form powering towards him. It was incredibly fast, moving at almost thirty-nine knots. Forty-five miles an hour. It wouldn't take very long to catch up with him. And there was more to come. There were two smaller boats with it. As Alex risked another glance behind him he saw them peel away from it, leaping ahead and rapidly closing the distance between the Princess and him.

They were brand-new Bella 620 DC speedboats, Finnish-made and shipped out to the Caribbean.

They were twenty feet long, squat and mean-looking with silver pulpit rails shaped like the nostrils of an angry bull. Each one was equipped with a single 150 horsepower Mercury Optimax Saltwater outboard and Alex knew that they had to be going almost twice as fast as him. They were less than a minute away.

There was nothing he could do. His hands were clamped tight round the control bar and he lowered the kite as much as he dared, desperately trying to pick up speed. Now he could hear the motors above the wind. More walls of water rose up in front of him. His legs trembled with the strain as he fought his way over the waves. The boats flew along, carving through them.

There were two men in each of them, one steering, the other holding a machine gun. They hadn't come to capture him and take him back. They were here to kill him. Alex heard the first rattle of machine-gun fire, almost lost in the roar of the waves. He slammed the bar into his chest, steering the kite up. At the same time, he transferred his weight to the flat of the board, tensed himself and jumped. Now he was in the air, ten metres above the water. The bullets passed underneath him. The hang time seemed to stretch on for ever. He was flying, his whole body tilted backwards, the soles of his feet towards the sky. The men in the speedboats had been taken by surprise. Thrown around by the sea, they were off balance, half blinded by the spray, unable to aim at a target high above their heads. For a few seconds, Alex was safe.

But he couldn't defy gravity for ever. Alex braced himself for the splash down, trying to ignore the two boats, which were horribly close. He landed between them, bending his knees to absorb some of the impact, lowering the kite to maintain speed. If he toppled over, he would die. But while he remained standing, the men couldn't fire. There was too much risk that they would hit each other in the crossfire.

And then Alex saw Barbados. It was there, ahead of him, no bigger than a one-penny piece. If he could survive just a few more minutes, he would be all right.

He was being pulled along between the two boats, all three of them doing the same speed. He was so close to the men that but for the scream of the engines and the booming of the waves he would have been able to call out to them. He could sense his strength beginning to fail him. His arms were aching. All his muscles were straining. He could barely feel the board beneath his feet.

And then the boat on his left edged ahead, allowing the one on his right a clear line of fire. Alex saw the guard raise his machine gun, preparing to shoot. He was a sitting duck skimming across the water, totally unprotected, just a couple of metres away from the man who was about to mow him down.

Alex did the only thing he could. Once again he took to the air, but this time he didn't jump as high. The man with the gun might think he'd miscalculated. But Alex knew exactly what he was doing. Everything depended on surprise.

As he took off, he let go of the bar with one hand and reached down. There was a handle in the middle of the board and he grabbed hold of it. He was hanging in the air and the board fell away, coming free of his feet. Holding it tightly, Alex swung it beneath him like a club. The board slammed into the man's head.

Alex knew that it was made of Kevlar, the same material that the SAS used for their body armour. For the man with the machine gun, it was like being hit with a slab of metal. He crumpled. But his finger was still on the trigger. Alex saw the muzzle flash. Bullets tore into the deck of the boat, shattered the windscreen and hit the driver. He jerked and fell forward. The boat went out of control.

Alex slid the board back under him, and managed to get his feet into the straps a second before he hit the water.

The Bella 620 DC had an unconscious passenger and a dead driver slumped over the wheel. It performed a fantastic S-bend, veering first to the right, then back to the left, crossed the open expanse of water and smashed at full speed into the other boat. Alex watched as the two craft collided. There was an explosion of splintering metal and fibreglass, and the second boat was flipped into the air. For a brief moment, it seemed to hang there, and Alex glimpsed the face of the terrified driver, upside down, as he gazed at his own death. Then it pancaked down and there was a huge splash.

It was over. Alex allowed the kite to drag him out of danger. He was suddenly alone.

But not for long. The Princess had been hanging back, waiting for the two speedboats to finish their work.

Now it surged forward. As well as the driver, it was carrying three guards armed with machine guns. The men had seen what had happened; they would be more careful. All they had to do was move into range and they would be able to cut him down.

Alex didn't have the strength for another jump. Barbados was looming up in front of him but, as if taunting him, the wind had died down. He could feel himself losing speed. He brought the kite as low as he dared but it made no difference. There was nothing more he could do.

He braced himself, waiting for the chatter of the guns and the searing agony that would follow.

There was another explosion. A blast of smoke and burning petrol. Alex toppled sideways, deafened. He wondered for the briefest of moments if he had been hit. Then he plunged into the water as fragments of broken, blackened fibreglass ricocheted all around him like a swarm of bees. His hands no longer had the strength to hang onto the control bar. He was sucked beneath the surface, twisting round and round, broken, finished.

He surfaced.

The Princess was on fire. There was no sign of the driver, no sign of the three armed men. The boat swerved, trailing black smoke, and began to slow down.

Alex was choking. He coughed up water and twisted round. Another boat had appeared, some sort of naval vessel. There was a man standing in the bow, holding a bazooka. Alex recognized the blond hair and chiselled features of Ed Shulsky, the CIA agent he had met in New York.

“Alex!” Shulsky called out. “You want a ride?”

Alex was too weak to respond. His shoulders and face had been burnt by the sun but he was shivering. The boat drew up alongside him and he was pulled on board. There were a dozen men on the deck, all young and tough-looking. Someone produced a large towel and wrapped it around him.

“We were watching the island,” Shulsky told him. “We saw you coming, although we didn’t know it was you at first. To be honest, we couldn’t believe what we were seeing. I still don’t believe it! So we came over to help...”

It was all the explanation Alex needed. “Drevin has Tamara Knight,” he said. “She’s a prisoner. And there’s something you need to know—”

Just then, it happened.

A blinding light so bright that it seemed to blot out the sun, sucking the blue out of the sea and the sky, turning the whole world white. A noise like an explosion, only ten times louder and more sustained. A shock wave that shivered across the water, sending new waves punching into the side of the boat. The very air seemed to vibrate and Alex felt a bolt of pain in both ears.

He turned in time to see a silver pencil blasting into the sky, flame scorching out of its base, rising as if on a cushion of smoke. It was ten miles away, tiny, but even so Alex could sense its awesome power and majesty.

He watched as it disappeared, effortlessly penetrating the upper atmosphere.

He was too late. Gabriel 7 had been launched.

The bomb that was going to bring Ark Angel crashing down onto Washington was on its way.

THE RED BUTTON

It sometimes seemed to Alex that the whole universe was against him. Getting away from Flamingo Bay had almost killed him. It had been an exhausting struggle against time, the elements and Drevin's firepower.

And now he was going back.

It was the CIA agent, Ed Shulsky, who had made it happen.

"Alex, you know the place. I need you to tell me where they're holding Tamara. You can give me the layout of the island. Anyway, we don't have much time. You saw for yourself. The rocket is on its way, and if what you've told me is true..."

"It is." Alex felt a spurt of annoyance. Why should the American doubt, even for a moment, what he had said? Was it perhaps because he was only fourteen?

Shulsky noticed his reaction. "I'm sorry. That was out of line. But this plan of his, Ark Angel ...

Washington..." He shook his head. "It's beyond anything we could have imagined. And that's why we have to take him out. Right now. We don't have time to drop you off."

"But you're too late," Alex argued. "Gabriel 7 has gone. What are you going to do? Shoot it down?"

Shulsky smiled. "There's no need for that. All we have to do is find the red button." Alex looked puzzled.

"The self-destruct! If something went wrong with the launch, Drevin would have had to have a fallback.

We'll be able to blow it up before it gets anywhere near Ark Angel."

Alex was standing at the bow of the armour-plated Mark V Special Operations Craft, the sleek, streamlined vessel used primarily to carry SEAL combat swimmers into operations. It was equipped with 7.62mm Gatling guns and Stinger missiles and the dozen men had been drafted in from the Special Operations Force, fully armed and ready to invade the island.

He was wearing combat clothes that were a little too big for him; someone had found a spare set on board.

Now he watched as the island drew closer, the familiar landmarks coming into focus. The strange thing was, deep inside, he knew that he would have wanted to come back, even if Shulsky hadn't made any argument pointless. Tamara Knight was waiting for him. And then there was Paul Drevin. Alex wanted a chance to explain himself. He still felt bad about what he'd done.

"Two minutes!" Shulsky called out.

The men began to check their weapons and body armour. They were heading for the old wooden jetty

near the house. Shulsky intended to approach the control centre through the rainforest. It would mean a forced march along the length of the island and would take longer, but after Alex had described the launch area, Shulsky had decided a frontal attack would be too risky. There was no shelter; they would be cut down the moment they left the boat.

Shulsky rejoined Alex at the bow. "I want you to stay on board until the fighting's over," he announced.

"What do you mean?" Alex protested. "I thought you wanted me to help."

"You have helped. Thanks to you, we know where we're going and what we're going to do. But this is going to be a war, Alex. And I can't afford to have my men worrying about you. Stay on the boat and stay out of sight."

It was too late to argue. They had reached the jetty, and Alex had to admit that Shulsky was right about one thing. This side of the island was deserted. If Drevin had seen them coming, he had concentrated his forces around the launch site; nobody so much as blinked as the boat drew up at the jetty. Alex watched the thirteen Americans disembark. They stomped across the beach and disappeared through the palm trees.

He still wished he had gone with them. He had told them where to find Tamara but he would have liked to be the one to release her himself.

He was left behind. Forgotten. He could see Drevin's house in the distance, the sunlight sparkling off the windows. Someone had dumped some waterskis and two tow ropes on the sand, but otherwise the beach was empty. The Cessna 195 was bobbing in the shallows but there was no sign of the pilot.

The Cessna.

It hadn't been there when Alex had set off with the kite. He felt a sense of misgiving. If Drevin knew that the Americans were on their way, his first thought would be to save his own skin. Shulsky and his men had rushed off without stopping to think. They should have disabled the seaplane first.

Alex looked around, searching for a weapon or anything he could use to do the job himself. But the Americans had taken everything and he had no doubt that the Gatling guns would be locked in their mounting positions. What else? Nothing. Just the two canoes sitting peacefully beside the jetty, the waterskiing equipment, and a pelican watching him from a distant wooden post.

The silence was broken by a rattle of machine-gun fire and the pelican took off in fright. It had begun. Alex listened as the shooting intensified. There was an explosion and a column of flame rose up briefly above the trees. A movement caught his eye. A buggy was racing along the track. Alex glimpsed it between the palm trees. Then it broke out into the open and he froze. The buggy was being driven by Nikolei Drevin.

He was alone.

Alex assumed Drevin would make for the seaplane, but he continued to the house. Maybe there was a safe there. Maybe he needed to pick up a few last things. Or perhaps he'd come back for Paul. Alex tried to work out what to do. He wished more than ever that Shulsky had taken him with him—or at least left one of his men behind.

Five minutes later, he approached the house.

Alex knew he was making a mistake, but he had to see for himself what Drevin was doing. Anyway, it was against his nature to sit there, skulking away in an American boat while the fighting continued all around him. He could smell burning. Black smoke was drifting across the forest. There was more gunfire. Alex hurried across the hot sand, knowing that he had arrived at the endgame. The last moves were about to be played.

He reached the side of the building and pressed himself against the wall, keeping out of sight. The terrace where he had eaten breakfast with Drevin and Paul was directly above him. A wooden staircase curved up from the beach and Alex was just considering whether he could risk climbing it to look in through the window, when Drevin appeared round the side of the house, an attaché case in one hand, an automatic pistol in the other.

He saw Alex and stopped. "Alex Rider!" he exclaimed. His eyes were curiously empty. In the last few hours he seemed to have shrunk. "Why did you come back?"

Alex shrugged. "I forgot to say thanks for having me."

"I am glad to see you one last time. I wonder what it was that brought you and me together. Was it fate?"

Was it destiny?"

"I think it was Alan Blunt."

"MI6? Well, they've failed. Gabriel 7 will reach Ark Angel; it can't be stopped. The bomb will explode and Washington will be destroyed, along with all the evidence against me."

"They don't need any evidence against you now," Alex said. "They all know you're mad."

"Yes. It will be necessary for me to disappear. But it will be easy. A man with my wealth, with my contacts..."

"The world's too small for someone like you to hide."

"We'll see." Drevin raised the gun. "But one thing is certain. We won't meet again."

He fired.

Alex had been ready for it. He dived down onto the sand. He felt the first hail of bullets pass centimetres over his head—and knew there was no way he could avoid the second.

Drevin groaned.

It was the most terrible sound Alex had ever heard, an animal cry that seemed to come from the very depths of the man's soul. He looked up, brushing sand out of his eyes. He saw Drevin standing there, quite limp, his eyes staring. Then he looked behind him.

Paul Drevin had come out of the house. He must have heard them talking, and walked round the side of the building just as Drevin had fired. Alex had dived out of the way but Paul hadn't been so lucky. He had taken the full impact of the bullets, and he was lying on his back, arms and legs spread wide, blood soaking into the sand.

“You...!” Drevin screamed the single word. Then he began to babble. Not in English but Russian. His face was white, twisted in pain and hatred. Tears were seeping out of the corners of his eyes. He pointed the gun at Alex once more. But this time Alex was ready for him.

Before Drevin could pull the trigger, Alex began to roll, spinning over and over, propelling himself towards the house. Bullets kicked up the sand, then slammed into the nearest wall. But Drevin had been caught by surprise. Still rolling, Alex disappeared into the crawl space underneath the house. It was cold and damp here. There might be spiders or scorpions nestling in the foundations. But he was in the dark, out of the range of the bullets. For a moment, he was safe.

Drevin hardly seemed to notice. He fired at the house until the gun clicked uselessly in his hands. It took him a while to realize that he had run out of bullets. Then, with a curse, he threw the gun down and staggered over to his son. Paul wasn't moving. In the distance, he heard shouting. A buggy was approaching through the rainforest. Drevin turned and ran across the beach towards the waiting plane.

Lying on his stomach, Alex looked out through the gap between the bottom of the house and the sand. He saw Drevin reach the water's edge and knew that he wasn't coming back. Slowly, dreading what he was going to find, he crawled back out into the open and went over to Paul.

There was a lot of blood. Alex was certain that the boy was dead, and he was overwhelmed by a feeling of sadness and guilt. But then, to his surprise, Paul opened his eyes. Alex knelt down beside him. Now that he was looking closely he could see that, beneath the blood, the damage might not be as bad as he had feared.

Paul had been shot in the shoulder and the arm but the rest of the bullets must have passed over his head.

“Alex...” he rasped.

“Don't move,” Alex said. “I'm really sorry, Paul. This is all my fault. I should never have come here.”

“No. I was wrong...” Paul tried to speak but the effort was too much.

Alex heard the sound of the Cessna's engine and turned round in time to see the plane moving away from the jetty. Drevin was piloting it. Alex could make out the crazed, distorted face behind the controls. At the same time, a buggy screeched to a halt in front of the house and Ed Shulsky and two men jumped out. Alex was relieved to see that Tamara was with them, still pale but looking stronger than when he had last seen her.

“Alex!” she called out, then stopped, seeing Paul.

Shulsky signalled, and the two men sprinted over to the wounded boy, pulling out medical packs as they ran. “What happened here?” he asked.

“Drevin,” Alex said. “He hit Paul instead of me.”

“How bad is it?” Shulsky addressed one of the two men.

“I think he's going to be OK,” the man replied, and Alex felt a surge of relief. “He's lost blood, and we're going to have to helicopter him out as soon as possible. But he'll live.”

Shulsky turned to Alex. "We've taken control of the island," he told him. "Drevin's men didn't put up much of a fight. But we lost Drevin. Where is he?"

Alex pointed. The Cessna 195 had reached full speed and was rising smoothly out of the water. Bizarrely, impossibly, two canoes had risen up behind it, as if following it out of the sea and into the sky.

"What the—" Shulsky began.

It was the only thing Alex had been able to do in the time he'd had. Using the tow ropes from the waterskiing equipment, he'd tied the canoes to the seaplane's floats. He had thought about securing the Cessna to the jetty, but Drevin would have spotted that. Part of him had hoped that the plane wouldn't be able to take off, but he was disappointed. It was already high up, a bizarre sight with the two canoes dangling underneath it. Alex wondered if Drevin had even noticed. Well, whatever happened, it would make the plane easier to spot, and when it landed, with a bit of luck, the canoes might cause it to overturn.

But then Drevin made his last mistake.

Alex would never know what was in the Russian's mind. Did he think his son was dead? Did he think Alex was to blame? It seemed he had decided to take revenge. The plane swung round and suddenly it was heading back towards them. With no warning, before there was even any sound, the sand leapt up all around them and Alex realized that Drevin was firing at them, using a machine gun mounted somewhere on the plane. The detonations came a moment later. Everyone dived for cover, the two male agents crouching over the injured boy, protecting him with their own bodies. Bullets smashed into the side of the house; wood splintered and one of the great glass windows frosted and cascaded down. The plane roared overhead and continued towards the rainforest. The canoes bumped and twisted just behind.

Drevin had missed them on the first pass but Alex knew they wouldn't be so lucky on the second. He looked at Shulsky, wondering what the CIA agent was planning to do. They might be able to make it into the house. But what about Paul? Moving him too quickly would kill him.

The plane began to turn. The canoes dipped down. Drevin was directly over the forest. He hadn't seen the canoes, so had no idea how low they were. There were two trees close to one another. As Alex watched—

with a shiver of horror—the canoes collided with the trunks and became stuck between them, caught sideways on.

The plane came to an abrupt halt. It was as if it had anchored itself in mid-air. There was the sound of breaking wood. The canoes had smashed—but so had the floats. In fact, the entire undercarriage of the plane had been torn away, and Drevin was left sitting on thin air, surrounded by half a plane. One moment he had been flying forward. The next he simply rotated ninety degrees and swooped vertically down towards the ground. There was a scream from what was left of the engine; the Cessna's propeller turned uselessly. Alex saw the plane disappear into the forest. There was a crash and then, seconds later, a ball of flame. It leapt up into the sky almost as if it was trying to escape from the devastation below. Two more explosions. Then silence.

For what seemed like an eternity, Alex stared towards the crash site. A fire still raged among the trees and he wondered if it would spread across the island. But even as he watched, the flames

started to flicker and die down, to be replaced by a plume of smoke that rose up in the shape of a final exclamation mark. Drevin was dead. There could be no doubt about that.

Alex felt an immense weariness. It seemed to him that everything that had happened, from the moment he had met Nikolei Drevin at the Waterfront Hotel in London, had somehow been leading to this moment. He thought back to the luxury of Neverglade, the go-kart race, the football match that had ended in murder, the flight to America. Drevin had been a monster and he'd deserved to die. Washington was no longer in any danger. Gabriel 7 and the bomb it was carrying would be blown up long before it reached Ark Angel.

But Alex couldn't feel any sense of victory. He looked back at Paul Drevin. The two agents were busy working on him, one of them wrapping pressure bandages around his wounds while the other fed an IV

needle into his arm. Paul's eyes were closed. Mercifully he had slipped into unconsciousness and so hadn't seen what had just happened.

Alex turned back and watched the smoke spread through the air, and suddenly he wanted to be far away from Flamingo Bay. He wanted to be with Jack. The two of them would take a plane home.

It was finally over.

He realized that Ed Shulsky and Tamara were staring at him.

"What is it?" he asked.

The two CIA agents exchanged a look. Then Shulsky spoke. "I wish you hadn't done that," he said. "We wanted to have a word with Mr Drevin."

Alex shrugged. "I don't think he was planning to hang around for a chat."

"You may be right," Shulsky agreed. "But we still needed to speak to him." He paused. "You remember that red button I was telling you about?"

Alex nodded. "Yes."

"Well, it seems I was wrong. There isn't one. We can't blow up Gabriel 7. There's nothing we can do to stop it."

"What?" Alex's head spun. "But you just said that you're in control of the island. There must be something you can do."

Tamara shook her head. "After the launch, Drevin locked down all the computer systems," she explained.

"He was the only one with the codes. It's not your fault, Alex. By the time we'd caught up with him it probably would've been too late. But right now Gabriel 7 is on its way and we can't communicate with it.

We can't bring it back and we can't divert it. It's going to dock with Ark Angel in less than three hours from now. The bomb is on a timer. It's all going to happen exactly as Drevin planned."

"So what are you going to do?" Alex asked.

Tamara didn't have the heart to say it. She glanced at Shulsky.

"Alex," he said. "I'm afraid we need your help."

ARK ANGEL

“No,” Alex said. “No way. Forget it. The answer is no!”

“Let’s go over this again,” Ed Shulsky suggested.

They were sitting in the control centre on the western stretch of Flamingo Bay. Alex had been driven there from Drevin’s house and it was clear that Shulsky’s men were in command. Very little damage had been done. The guardhouse and the gate had been blown up—that was the explosion Alex had heard—but it seemed that Drevin’s men had surrendered quickly. None of them had known what Drevin was really planning. They had been paid to help launch a rocket into space: Drevin had never told them what the rocket actually contained.

At least Paul Drevin was out of it. He had been flown to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Bridgetown, on Barbados. Alex was relieved to hear that he was going to be all right. He had already been given blood and the doctors were waiting for his condition to stabilize before he was flown to America. His mother was apparently on her way to see him. Alex wondered if the two of them would ever meet again. Somehow he doubted it.

Now there were just four people in the room, surrounded by computers, video screens and the blinking lights of the electronic display board. A series of blueprints had been spread out on the large conference table. They showed the overall design of Ark Angel with the different modules—a dozen of them—

extending in every direction, up and down. It was like an enormously complicated toy.

Alex was slumped in a chair, his face grim, still dressed in the borrowed combat clothes. Ed Shulsky and Tamara Knight were sitting opposite him. Tamara looked exhausted, grey with pain and fatigue. She’d accepted a shot of morphine but nothing else. She wasn’t leaving Alex until a decision had been made.

The fourth person in the room was Professor Sing Joo-Chan, the man in charge of the Gabriel 7 launch. The flight director seemed a completely different person. He had lost his calm and self-possession and looked as if he was on the verge of a heart attack. His face was pale and he was sweating profusely, dabbing at his forehead with a large white handkerchief. Like everyone else, he claimed to know nothing about the bomb, nothing about Drevin’s real plans. He had promised to cooperate, to do anything the CIA required, and for the time being Shulsky was giving him the benefit of the doubt. But Alex wasn’t so sure. The professor had been recruited by Drevin; he had been in charge of the operation from the very start. Alex was certain he knew more than he was letting on.

“This is the situation,” Shulsky said. “Gabriel 7 will dock with Ark Angel at half past two this afternoon.

It’s carrying a bomb which will go off exactly two hours after that.” He glanced at Alex. “Drevin told you that himself.”

Alex nodded. "That's right. Half past four. That's what he said."

"Now, as I understand it, there are three docking ports on Ark Angel." Shulsky pointed to the diagram.

"Two of them are positioned at the very centre ... here. But that's not where Gabriel 7 is heading, because if the bomb blew up there it would simply rip the whole space station apart." He reached out and tapped a section on the other side, at the end of a long corridor. "Gabriel 7 will dock here," he explained. "Right on the edge."

"Yes—the very edge!" Sing agreed. Alex noticed that the professor's eyes were wide and unfocused. He was taking care not to look at anyone directly. "That's how it was decided. That's what Mr Drevin insisted."

"The bomb must be inside the observation module," Shulsky said. "And I guess it'll be in exactly the right position. Most of the force from the explosion will go outwards. It'll have the effect of a push in the wrong direction, propelling the entire space station back to earth." He took a deep breath and for a moment something like panic flashed in his eyes. "The hell of it is, there's nothing we can do to stop it. We can't blow up Gabriel 7. And according to Professor Sing here, we can't access the computers to reprogram it."

"You can't!" The white handkerchief was out again. "Only Mr Drevin had the codes. Only Mr Drevin —"

"I've checked it, Alex," Tamara said. "It's true. The entire system has been shut down. It would take us days—possibly even weeks—to hack into it."

"I know it sounds crazy, but that leaves us with just one option," Shulsky went on. "We have to send somebody up to Ark Angel. Believe me, Alex, it's the only way. Someone has to find the bomb and neutralize it—by which I mean switch it off. And if that isn't possible, then they have to move it. They have to carry it into the middle of the space station and leave it there. That way, the force of the explosion will have a completely different effect. It'll destroy Ark Angel. What pieces are left will scatter and burn up in the outer atmosphere."

"You will destroy Ark Angel!" Professor Sing whispered the words as if he couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"I don't give a damn about Ark Angel, Professor!" Shulsky almost shouted the words. "My only concern is Washington."

"Move the bomb or switch it off—what difference does it make?" Alex asked. "How is anyone going to get there?"

"That's the whole point," Shulsky said. "The Soyuz-Fregat is ready for launching. It was all set to carry Arthur into space." He paused. "But there's no reason why it shouldn't carry you."

"Me? You really want to send me into outer space?"

"Yes."

"I'm not an orang-utan."

"I know. I know. But you have to understand! What we're talking about here, it's not as complicated

as you think. I mean, a rocket is a pretty simple piece of machinery. It's just like a tank. It's not as if you have to control it or anything—that's all done from here." Shulsky gestured around the room. "We still have access to the flight programs for the Soyuz-Fregat. The computers marked COMMAND tell the rocket what to do.

The docking, the re-entry ... everything. And those marked TELEMETRY allow us to monitor the health and well-being of the passenger. You."

"Not me."

"There is no one else," Shulsky said, and Alex could hear the desperation in his voice. "That's the whole point, Alex. We're adults. We're all too big!" He turned to Professor Sing. "Tell him!"

Sing nodded. "It's true. We planned to put Arthur—the ape—into space. I made all the calculations personally. The launch, the approach, the docking—all of it. But the first differential is the weight. The weight of the passenger. If the weight changes, then all the calculations have to change and that will take days."

"What makes you think I weigh the same?"

The professor spread his hands. "You weigh almost the same, and we can work within a margin. It's possible. But it's not just the weight. It's the size."

"The capsule has been modified and none of us would fit inside," Shulsky explained. "There isn't enough room. You're the only one who can go, Alex. Heaven knows, I wouldn't ask you otherwise. But there is no other way. It has to be you."

Alex's head was swimming. He hadn't slept for almost thirty hours; he wondered if this whole conversation wasn't some sort of hallucination. "But how would I even find the bomb?" he asked. "And if I did find it, how would I know where to put it?"

"You put it here." Again Shulsky pointed at one of the modules in the diagram. "This is the sleeping area.

You'll pass through it on your way to Gabriel 7. It's the very heart of Ark Angel. This is where the bomb has to be when it blows up. I've gone over it with the professor and he agrees. If it happens here, Washington will be safe."

"I'm just meant to carry it from one place to another?"

"It'll weigh nothing at all," Sing reminded him. "You see—it's zero gravity!"

Alex felt weak. He wanted to argue but he knew that nobody was listening. They had all made up their minds.

Tamara reached out and took his hand. "Alex, I'd go if I could," she said. "I'm just about small enough and I guess I weigh the same as you. But I don't think I'd make it. Not with this bullet wound..."

"I thought most kids would give their right arm to go into outer space," Shulsky added unhelpfully.

"Haven't you ever dreamt about becoming an astronaut?"

“No,” Alex said. “I always wanted to be a train driver.”

“Statistically, the Soyuz has an excellent reliability record,” Tamara said. Alex remembered seeing her reading about space travel on Drevin’s plane. “Hundreds of them have gone up, and there have been only a couple of hiccups.”

“How long will it take him to get there?” Shulsky asked. As far as he was concerned, Alex had already agreed to go.

“He’ll be launched along the plane of orbit,” Professor Sing replied. “I can’t explain it all to you now. But he’ll follow a trajectory that exactly matches the inclination of Ark Angel. Eight minutes to leave the earth’s atmosphere. And he will dock in less than two hours.”

“And the Soyuz-Fregat is ready?”

“Yes, sir. It’s ready now.”

That struck Alex as odd. He knew that the second launch had been brought forward—but why had Drevin been preparing to send the ape into space at all, just hours after Gabriel 71? If his plan had worked, Ark Angel would have been destroyed soon after the second rocket arrived. Not for the first time, Alex was aware that there was something they didn’t know, something that everyone had overlooked. But his thoughts were in such confusion that he couldn’t work out what it was.

Tamara was still holding his hand. “I know it’s too much to ask,” she said. “I know you don’t want to do it.

But, believe me, we wouldn’t ask you if there was another way. And you’ll be safe. You’ll make it back. I know you will.”

Suddenly everyone was silent. They were all looking at him. Alex thought of the bomb that was closing in on Ark Angel even now. He thought of an explosion in outer space, and the space station plunging towards Washington. What had Drevin said? Four hundred tonnes of it would survive. The shock wave would destroy most of the city.

He thought of Jack Starbright, who was somewhere in the middle of it all, visiting her parents. And he knew that—just like Arthur—he didn’t have any choice.

He nodded.

“Let’s get you suited up,” Ed Shulsky said.

After that, things moved very quickly. For Alex, it was as if his world had disintegrated. He was aware of bits and pieces but nothing flowed. From the day he’d managed to get himself caught up with MI6, he had often found it hard to believe what was happening to him. But this was something else again. He seemed to have lost any sense of his own identity. He was being swept along, out of control, edging closer and closer to something that filled him with more horror than he had ever known.

He was made to shower and dress in the clothes that he had seen in the building where he and Tamara had been imprisoned: a white T-shirt and a blue tracksuit with the Ark Angel logo stitched onto the sleeve.

Straps passed under his feet to hold the trousers in place and there were six pockets fastened with zips.

Suddenly he was surrounded by people he had never met, all of them giving him advice, preparing him for the terrible journey he was about to make.

“You need to watch out for what we call the breakaway phenomenon!” This from a man in glasses with hair on his neck. Some sort of psychologist. “It’s a feeling of euphoria. You may like it so much up there that you won’t want to come back.”

“I somehow doubt it,” Alex growled.

“We’ll be attaching EKG and biosensor leads...”

“We’re going to give you an injection.” This was a blonde-haired woman in a white coat. She was holding a large hypodermic syringe. “This is phenergan. It’ll make you feel better.”

“I feel fine.”

“You’ll almost certainly throw up when you reach zero gravity. Most astronauts do.”

“Well, that’s something you never see on Star Trek,” Alex muttered. “All right.” He rolled up his sleeve.

“Not your arm, Alex. This goes in your butt...”

He wondered why they hadn’t given him a proper spacesuit, the sort of thing he’d seen in old films of the moon landings. Professor Sing explained.

“You don’t need it, Alex. Arthur, also, wouldn’t have worn a spacesuit. You will be inside a sealed capsule.

If there was a leak, it’s true that you would need a spacesuit to protect you; but that’s not going to happen, I promise you. Trust me!”

Alex looked at the dark, blinking eyes behind the spectacles. He knew that Sing was ingratiating himself with the CIA, trying to persuade them that he had been innocent from the start. He was sure that Ed Shulsky and Tamara would be watching him throughout the entire launch. But he still didn’t trust the professor. He was certain there was something he wasn’t being told.

They gave him a headset and radio and wired up his heart. It seemed impossible to Alex that anyone could go into space like this, without months of training. Tamara never left his side, trying to reassure him. A fourteen-year-old was more adaptable than an adult, she said. It was going to be a bumpy ride, but he would come through it comfortably because he was young. And maybe Ed Shulsky was right. It would be something to talk about. An experience he would never forget.

And then he was in an electric buggy with Tamara and Professor Sing, feeling strange in his tracksuit, the material soft against his skin. The rocket was ahead of him. He looked at it but didn’t see it. It was as if the connection had been severed between his eyes and his brain. It was huge. The capsule that would carry him into space was at the very top of a silver tank as tall as an office block, suspended between two gantries. Water was cascading down. Was it raining? No, the water seemed to be coming from the rocket.

He could hear the metal creaking as if it needed a huge effort just to keep it in place. There were clouds of white steam pouring out—boil-off from the propellant. Alex saw a deep trench running from the launch pad towards the sea; he guessed it would carry the flames from the solid rocket boosters. It seemed impossible to him that this oversized firework could actually rise up and carry him into space.

In a lift, climbing higher and higher, still with Tamara and the professor. He could see the whole island, the sea stretching out an amazing blue—and there was Barbados in the distance. He was still being given advice. So many words. But they didn't actually penetrate. They just flitted around him like moths.

“...do everything lightly, do everything slowly. Don't look directly at the sun. It'll blind you. Don't even look at the clouds around the earth. The sun reflects... Some parts of Ark Angel will be hot—some will be cold. There have been problems with the air-conditioning... You're going to feel strange. Don't worry if your face becomes puffy or swells up. If your spine stretches. If you need to go to the toilet. It's the same for all astronauts. Your body has to adapt to zero gravity...”

Who was talking? Were they really being serious? How could anybody expect him to do this?

“You'll need to access the observation module of Gabriel 7 to get to the bomb. There's a hatch. You saw it on the diagram. You move it to where Ed showed you and then you get back into the Soyuz's re-entry module. Don't waste any time. We'll control everything from here. You'll feel it disengage...”

And then he was inside. They had certainly been right about the amount of space. No adult would have been able to fit into it. He was lying on his back in a metal box that could have been some kind of complicated washing machine or water tank, his feet in the air and his legs so tightly packed in that his knees were touching his chin. There were tiny windows on either side but they were covered with some sort of material and he couldn't see out of them. There were no controls. Of course not. Arthur the orang-utan wouldn't have needed controls. Professor Sing was wiring him up. More monitors. Now Alex was the one who was sweating. They had told him he would sweat even more when he was in outer space. Because of fluids moving up, the body's salt concentration being upset. Alex tried to put it out of his mind. He didn't even believe he would get there. He didn't think he would survive the journey.

Tamara Knight leant over him. He was strapped into his seat. His stomach was clenched tight and he had difficulty drawing the air into his lungs. He could move his arms but nothing else. He was already cramped and he hadn't even started. Her face was very close to his, filling his field of vision.

“Good luck, Alex,” she whispered. Nothing more. She waved a hand with fingers crossed.

“You will hear the countdown,” Professor Sing said. He was somewhere behind her. “You have nothing to worry about, Alex. We will guide you through it all. You'll hear us over the radio. We'll look after you.”

They sealed the door. Alex felt the air inside the capsule compress. He swallowed, trying to clear his ears.

Apart from the sound of his own breathing, everything was silent.

He was alone.

“T-minus thirty.” A crackle and a hiss of static. The disembodied words had come through the headset.

What did they mean? Thirty minutes until blast-off. In thirty minutes’ time he would be leaving the planet!

Alex tried to make himself more comfortable but he couldn’t move.

“How are you doing, Alex?” It could have been Ed Shulsky talking. Alex didn’t know. The voices echoed inside his head and they all sounded the same.

“T-minus twenty-five... T-minus twenty...”

He could only sit there, doubled up on himself, as the countdown continued. The strange thing was, it felt that time had gone wrong too. A minute seemed like half an hour. Yet half an hour was passing in only minutes. He concentrated on his breathing.

“T-minus fifteen.”

Inside the control room Ed Shulsky was watching Sing and his team of thirty as they went through the final preparations. He walked over to the professor. He was wearing a gun in a holster slung over his shirt.

“I don’t mean to worry you right now, Professor,” he muttered. “But I want you to know that if Alex Rider doesn’t come out of this in one piece, I will personally rip your guts out.”

“Of course!” Sing smiled nervously. “There’s nothing to worry about. He’ll be fine!”

Tamara Knight sat motionless in front of the observation window. Smoke was still rising from the rainforest where the Cessna had crashed. There were no birds to be seen. The whole island seemed to be tensing itself for the moment of launch.

“T-minus five.”

What had happened to T-minus ten? Alex was feeling sick. The injection he’d been given hadn’t worked.

He could hear something in the distance. Was it his imagination or was something rumbling far below him?

“T-minus four... three ... two ... one.”

It began.

At first it was slow. Alex felt a shuddering, vague to start with, but soon it was all-consuming. The entire capsule was shaking. He wasn’t sure if he was moving or not. There was a thud as the clamps holding down the rocket were automatically released. The shuddering got worse. Now the whole capsule was vibrating so crazily that Alex could feel the teeth being shaken in his skull. The noise level had risen too; it was now a roar that pounded at him with invisible fists and, lying on his back

with his legs bent in front of him, there was nothing he could do. He was defenceless.

And still it got worse.

He was definitely rising; he could feel the force of the rocket's thrust. He was being pushed into the seat—

not pushed, crushed! His vision had almost gone. His eyeballs were being mercilessly squeezed. He tried to open his mouth to scream but all his muscles had locked. He felt as if his face was being pulled off.

And then there was a deafening explosion and he was slammed forward in his seat, his neck straining, the belts cutting into his chest. Alex panicked, thinking it had all gone wrong, that part of the rocket had blown up and any moment now he would be either incinerated or sent plummeting back to earth. But then he remembered what he had been told. The first stage of the rocket had burnt out and been ejected. That was what he had heard and felt. God help him, he really was on the way. From nought to seventeen and a half thousand miles an hour in eight minutes.

Everything had been calculated. There should have been an ape inside the orbital module—instead there was a boy. To the computers it made no difference. At exactly the right second, the next stage ignited and once again he was thrown forward, the g-forces pulverizing him. How long had passed since the countdown had ended? Was he in outer space yet? It seemed to him that the shaking was more violent than ever. The whole capsule had become a distorted mass of jagged, flickering lines, like the image on a broken TV screen. He was at max Q, sitting on four hundred and fifty tonnes of explosive, being rocketed through the sky at twenty-five times the speed of sound. The main engine was burning fuel at over one thousand gallons a second. If the Soyuz was going to blow up, it would happen now. He was on fire! Blinding light suddenly crashed into the capsule. A nuclear explosion. No. The fairings on the windows had come free.

They weren't needed any more. He was looking at the sun, which was streaming in, dazzling him. Was that blue sky or the sea? How much longer could his body stand the battering it was receiving? It occurred to Alex that nothing in the world, no amount of training, could have prepared him for an experience like this.

The rocket stopped. That was what it felt like. The noise fell away and Alex felt a quite different sensation: a sick, light-headed floating that told him he had, in an instant, become weightless. He was about to test it but then the third stage kicked in and once again he was propelled forward on this impossible fairground ride. This time he closed his eyes, unable to take any more, and so didn't see the moment when he broke through the onion peel of the earth's atmosphere and went from blue to black.

At last he opened his eyes. He wanted to stretch but that was impossible. Alex looked out of the window and saw stars ... thousands of them. Millions. Once again, he had no sense of movement. Was he really weightless? He fumbled a hand into one of the pockets in his trousers and brought out a pencil a few centimetres long. He let it go. The pencil floated in front of him. Alex stared at it. Before he knew what he was doing, he was laughing. He couldn't stop himself. It really was like one of those cheap special effects in a Hollywood film. But there were no hidden wires. No computer trickery. It was happening right before his eyes.

“Alex? How are you? Are you receiving me?” Ed Shulsky’s voice crackled in his ear, and the strange thing was that it sounded no different, no further away—even though Alex was already almost a hundred miles from the earth’s surface.

“I’m fine,” Alex replied, and there was a tone of wonderment in his voice. He had survived the launch. He was on his way.

“Congratulations. You’ve just broken a world record. You’re the youngest person in space...”

He was in space! With the shock of the launch behind him, Alex tried to relax and enjoy the view. But the windows were too small and in the wrong place. The earth was behind him and out of sight, but there were the stars and the infinite blackness all around. How strange it was, this sense that he was going nowhere.

The pencil was still in front of him. He touched it with his finger and watched it spin. Round and round it went. Alex was hypnotized by it. Nothing else seemed to be moving. This wasn’t a ride at all. He felt as if everything, his entire life, had stopped.

And then he saw Ark Angel.

At first he was aware of something shaped like a spider appearing in the periscope attached to the window inside the capsule. It looked like a star, but much brighter than the others. Gradually it drew closer. And suddenly it became clear, an awesome construction of silver modules and corridors, interlocking, criss-crossing, hanging from what looked like the tower of a crane, with massive panels stretching out in every direction, absorbing the energy of the sun. It was huge; it weighed almost seven hundred tonnes. But it was floating effortlessly in the great emptiness of space, and Alex had to remind himself that every piece of it had been laboriously constructed on earth and then carried up separately and assembled. It was an engineering feat beyond anything he had ever imagined.

Slowly Ark Angel filled his vision. Both he and the space station were travelling at seventeen and a half thousand miles per hour, so fast that to Alex it made no sense at all. But he seemed to be going very slowly.

Then a booster rocket fired and the Soyuz accelerated, moving in on the central docking port. It was the only way Alex could measure his progress through outer space ... a few metres at a time, getting closer and closer. The rockets were controlled from Flamingo Bay but they were accurate to a fraction of a millimetre.

Alex saw the curving metal plates, the intricate panel work that made up the space station. He saw a painted Union Jack and the words ARK ANGEL printed in grey.

The last part of the journey seemed to take for ever. The space station was swallowing him up and he had to remind himself that if something went wrong now it would have the impact of a bus smashing into a wall.

There was a slight jolt—nothing compared to what he had felt earlier. That was it. A voice crackled in his headset and he thought he heard applause—unless it was radio static. Whatever his misgivings about Professor Sing, it seemed that the flight director had been true to his word. Alex had arrived.

He looked at his watch. Someone had given it to him when he got dressed for the launch. Three o'clock. He had one and a half hours to find the bomb and either turn it off or move it. But there was something wrong.

For a second Alex panicked. Had the oxygen supply stopped? He swallowed hard, three or four times, gasping for air. He could feel his heart hammering and he was certain he was going to die. But it wasn't that. There was still air in the module—he just had to draw it in. Alex forced himself to calm down. What was it?

Of course. The silence. Nobody was talking to him. Either he was on the wrong side of the planet, out of range of the control centre, or the radio had broken down. The silence was total, absolute. He had never felt more empty, more alone. But it didn't matter. He didn't need anyone to talk to him.

He knew what he had to do.

He unstrapped himself and reached for the circular hatch just above his head. It was his first experience of zero gravity and he knew at once that he'd made a mess of it. He rose out of the seat far too quickly and his head thudded into the metal wall, knocking him back down again. He ended up where he had begun—but with a bruised forehead and the taste of blood in his mouth. A bad start.

Everything had to be done slowly. He reached up again and found the handle. He pulled it out and turned it. The hatch swung outwards.

Alex braced himself. If there was any error, if the airlock wasn't secured, he would be exposed to the most lethal environment known to man. And he would die the most horrible death. The air would be sucked out of his lungs and his blood would boil. All his internal organs would seize up and he would be ripped apart by the total vacuum of space. He tried not to think about it. It wasn't going to happen. In less than ninety minutes he would be on his way home.

He found himself looking into a tunnel, about eighty centimetres wide and a couple of metres long. This was the entrance—they called it the node—between his capsule and the reception area of Ark Angel.

Reconditioned air, cold and dry, blew into his face. He pushed up with his feet, the lightest movement possible. Effortlessly, he rose. It was just like he had seen in countless films. He was flying.

The node led into the first module. Ark Angel had been built for tourists. It called itself a space hotel. But of course, it was in truth a space station very similar to Mir or the ISS, with very little room and every available inch crammed with cupboards, lockers and all the wires, pipes, dials, gauges, switches, circuits and other essentials needed to keep its inhabitants alive. Each section was a cylinder about the size of an ordinary caravan, lit with a harsh white light and jammed with equipment and handrails on three sides.

There were more handrails and Velcro straps on the fourth. Alex understood that to stop himself floating off he would have to hook his hands or feet into the floor.

He had expected the interior to be silent. Instead he was aware of the humming of the air conditioners, the throb of pumps circulating liquid coolants through the walls, the grinding of metal against metal... tonnes of it bolted together even as it spun round in orbit. He breathed in deeply. The air was very dry. He wondered how it was produced. Did it come out of a bottle or was there a machine?

Alex floated—or tried to. Once again, he pushed too hard with his feet and the entire chamber turned

upside down as he spun helplessly around, totally out of control. Despite the injection, he was suffering from what NASA called space adaptation syndrome. In other words, he was about to throw up. He tried to steady himself. One of his hands caught the wall, sending him spinning the other way. He no longer knew what was up and what was down. He couldn't even see the capsule that had brought him here.

He reached out and managed to hook a finger into one of the straps. That slowed him. But the whole experience so far had been horrible. Alex had seen Star Wars. He'd watched Harrison Ford blast his way across the universe, and like millions of others he'd bought into the dream. The reality was nothing like it.

His body was sending his brain weird signals. He was sweating. The balance of his inner ear had gone. His bones, no longer needed, were leaking calcium. His back was aching because of the elongation of his spine.

Inside his stomach, his guts were floating helplessly, and because of the shift in his fluid level, he felt a desperate need to go to the toilet. None of this had ever happened to Harrison Ford.

And it got worse. Alex stopped spinning and found himself floating in the very centre of the module.

Either he was moving very slowly or he wasn't moving at all. The rails and Velcro straps were now uselessly high above his head. He stretched out his arms and discovered that the walls were a couple of centimetres out of reach. It was like some terrible nightmare. Every time he strained forward, his body moved back. He was quite literally stranded, floating helplessly, going nowhere.

What now? How did he make himself go up or down? He jerked his body and pedalled with his legs. It didn't help. He tried waving his arms like a bird in a bad cartoon. Nothing.

Alex started to panic. Nobody had warned him about this. He was stuck in zero gravity and he began to wonder if he wasn't doomed to remain like this until Ark Angel blew itself apart. He couldn't move!

It took him what seemed like an eternity to work it out. It was amazing really that a physics lesson on a damp Wednesday at Brookland School, should suddenly come to mind and save his life. He took off his shoes and threw them with all his strength. The forward motion produced an opposite reaction, a bit like the recoil from a gun. Alex was thrown back and managed to grab hold of a handrail. He clung there for a moment, breathing heavily. It had been a nasty moment and he would have to be very careful it didn't happen again.

He had to get moving. He hadn't been able to see the observation module and the remaining stages of Gabriel 7 on the far side of the space station, but he knew they were there. The rocket had docked automatically almost an hour ago and had brought with it an activated bomb. He looked at his watch again. Twenty-five minutes had passed! There was barely an hour left. If the bomb exploded at the right time and in the right place, he would be vaporized, and a four hundred tonne missile would begin its deadly journey back to earth. Alex thought back to the map of Ark Angel he had been shown and knew that he had to navigate his way through an interlocking series of modules to reach his destination. He remembered what Ed Shulsky had told him.

"Don't try to defuse it unless you're sure you know what you're doing, Alex. You press the wrong button, you'll be doing Drevin's work for him. Just move it into the sleeping area. That's all you have

to do. Move it and then get the hell out. Fast.”

It was ticking right now. Alex could imagine it. Just the two of them. Him and a bomb on a space station orbiting the earth.

He was about to set off when he heard something. The clang of a hatch closing. It was quite unmistakable.

He stopped and listened. Nothing. What next? Martians? He must have imagined it. Alex pushed off with his feet, as gently as possible, trying to steer himself towards the next module. Once again he had pushed too hard. His shoulder hit the roof—or the floor—of the node and for a second time he found himself spinning out of control.

He reached out with his hands to steady himself and found himself holding onto a lever that jutted out of the wall. It was a shutter release. Unable to contain his curiosity, he opened it, wondering if it would give him a view of the earth. But the space station was facing the wrong way. Alex reeled back, almost blinded, as brilliant light burst into the module. Professor Sing had warned him not to look directly into the sun.

Even in that brief instant, Alex had almost blinded himself.

He closed the shutter again and waited for his sight to return, then continued, gently flying into the sleeping area, the bunks attached vertically to the wall with straps to keep the crew members or guests from drifting off. In space you could sleep sideways, standing or upside down; it made no difference.

There was a long, brightly lit corridor straight ahead—four or five modules bolted together. Everything was white. This was the very heart of Ark Angel, with the dining room, the exercise room, the showers and lavatories, a living room and two laboratories all laid out next to one another. Gabriel 7 would have docked at the far end.

Alex tensed himself, preparing to make the next leap. He reached out with the palms of his hands. And froze.

A man had appeared in front of him, dressed in an identical suit to his own. The man was wearing a skullcap but, seeing Alex, he tore it off, revealing a mirror image of the world three hundred miles below.

Kaspar. Of course.

Alex had forgotten about him. So had everyone else. But Professor Sing must have known that Kaspar had been on board Gabriel 7—that was the one piece of information he had been keeping to himself. Why? Had he been so scared of Kaspar that he couldn't bring himself to reveal the whole truth?

It looked as if Alex would never know. Kaspar had seen him. He was only twenty metres away, at the other end of the corridor. He hadn't spoken a word but now—expertly, as if he had been trained—he pushed forward, floating through the air towards him. He was confident, in perfect control.

And he was holding a knife.

RE-ENTRY

It was something straight out of a nightmare. It was every nightmare rolled into one. The hideously tattooed face, the knife, Ark Angel, outer space... Alex could only watch helplessly as Kaspar headed towards him, flying, arms outstretched, legs trailing behind.

What was he doing in the space station?

And suddenly Alex understood.

The second rocket, the orang-utan, Drevin's so-called experiment in weightlessness—they had all been part of the plan. There was no experiment. There never had been.

Kaspar had gone up in Gabriel 7. And Alex knew why. His own experience of the launch should have made him see that it would have been completely insane to try sending an armed bomb into space. The terrible vibrations would have set it off before it had even left the atmosphere. Only when it was in space could it be armed, and that had meant sending someone up with it. Kaspar. But now he needed to get back again. That was the point of the second rocket. Professor Sing must have known all along. The Soyuz had been sent up to collect him. And Kaspar would surely have left instructions behind. If anything went wrong, if the rocket didn't arrive, the professor would have been killed. No wonder he had looked so nervous! In the end, he had made a choice. Send the rocket and let the two of them fight it out.

That was something else Alex understood. There were now two of them in the space station. But there was only one seat home.

Kaspar passed through the first node, where he was bathed momentarily in soft, pink light before he emerged into the glare of the next module. He seemed to be adept at manipulating himself in zero gravity.

He had aimed carefully and pushed off lightly. One hand touched a wall to correct himself; the other still clasped the knife. He was taking his time—but then he knew Alex had nowhere to hide. Just seconds remained before they would come face to face in a module barely large enough for them both.

Alex searched around him for a weapon, anything he could use to defend himself. But everything was packed down too neatly. The cupboards and lockers were closed. He was still feeling sick and disorientated and every movement he made threatened to propel him in the wrong direction. If he lost control and went into another spin he would be finished. Kaspar would cut him to pieces.

Kaspar passed through the next node. In a few moments he would arrive in the same module as Alex. The sleeping area. This was the place Professor Sing and Ed Shulsky had shown him on the map. The heart of Ark Angel. It seemed an appropriate meeting point. Maybe he could reason with Kaspar. The mission was pointless now—surely he would see sense?

But Alex doubted it. Kaspar's eyes looked empty, mad. There was a twisted smile on his lips. The knife he was holding was a Sabatier, the blade a single piece of high carbon stainless steel, hand-honed and about ten centimetres long. Where had he got it from? He couldn't possibly have brought it

with him. Then Alex remembered. Ark Angel was a hotel. One day it might have a chef cutting sirloin steak for some American multimillionaire, and someone had made sure he was properly equipped. Kaspar must have picked up the knife as he passed through the kitchen.

As Kaspar entered the sleeping area, Alex did the only thing he could. He crouched low, then kicked out, propelling himself along, a few inches above the floor, as if he were swimming underwater in a pool. His movement caught Kaspar unawares, and the man sailed past above him. Alex realized that there was one thing you couldn't do in zero gravity: change direction. Kaspar continued to the far wall, but as he passed him he slashed down with the knife. Alex felt the tip cut into the suit between his shoulder blades. He was lucky. Another few millimetres and it would have drawn blood. It had sliced the suit's material but hadn't pierced his skin.

Kaspar reached the far wall and clung onto one of the handholds. Alex continued through into the next module and managed to stop himself. He found himself surrounded by gym equipment: a treadmill, a pair of chest expanders, a rowing machine—but nothing he could throw at Kaspar. Where were the weights? Of course, there was no point having weights in a weightless environment. Alex scabbled for one of the lockers and the door fell open. There were tools inside. A hammer, a curiously shaped ratchet, some sort of bolt tightener. He grabbed the hammer, pulled it free and held it in front of him.

Alex turned and saw Kaspar preparing to launch a second attack. The man seemed crazed, as if he were on drugs. Perhaps he was. Or perhaps he found the experience of being in space as terrifying as Alex did.

“Kaspar!” Alex wasn't sure what to call him. What was his real name? Magnus Payne? But that wasn't how the two knew each other. “It's over,” he went on. “There's no point in this. Drevin is dead. The CIA's in control on Flamingo Bay.”

“You're lying!”

“How do you think I got here? There's nothing for you to do. Dropping Ark Angel on Washington—there's no point. Drevin's dead.”

“No!”

Two continents twisted in anger and disbelief as Kaspar kicked off, this time travelling diagonally down.

Alex knew there was no point trying to reason with him. Whatever had happened on Flamingo Bay, Kaspar needed the Soyuz. Alex stood in his way. So Alex had to die.

Kaspar flew towards him. Alex brought the hammer round and threw it with all his strength. For a moment he thought it would travel in slow motion. Wasn't that what happened in films? But it didn't. The hammer spun at full speed through the air and hit Kaspar on the shoulder. But would the hammer do any damage if it weighed nothing? Once again Alex thought back to his physics class, starting work on his GCSEs. The hammer picked up energy because of motion; the energy was dispersed when it came to rest.

In this instance, it came to rest because it had hit Kaspar square on. Kaspar howled and dropped the knife.

Energy dispersed equalled pain!

But the forward motion was enough to send Alex stumbling back, and for a moment he lost control. His shoulders crashed into a wall. Or perhaps it was the ceiling or the floor. It made no difference. Kaspar had leapt forward. He plunged down as if he had been fired from a gun, and a second later he was on top of Alex.

The blue and green skin of the man's face was just inches away. Eyes full of hatred glared at him. Kaspar's hands closed around his throat and began to tighten. The man was strangling him. And there was nothing Alex could do. He had no gadgets, no weapons. He couldn't even move. He could feel metal plates against his shoulders, one of the lockers pressing into his back. Kaspar was floating horizontally above him, connected to Alex only by his hands. The breath was no longer reaching Alex's lungs; the grip was too tight. He felt dizzy. In a few seconds he would pass out.

Barely knowing what he was doing, he scrabbled behind him. His knuckles brushed against some sort of lever. What was it? Even as his consciousness began to leave him, Alex remembered. He knew what the lever did. But now he couldn't find it. Desperately he lashed out and his flailing hand caught hold of it. He pulled down.

The shutter opened and the light that had almost blinded him before exploded into the module a second time, shafting in over his shoulder. The window was facing directly into the sun and the light had a physical force as it burst in. Alex could feel it burning his neck and shoulders. The whole capsule seemed to disintegrate into a brilliant chaos of white and silver, all other colours sucked out.

Kaspar screamed as the light seared his eyes. It was as if he had been punched in the face by the sun itself, and his hands fell away, instinctively coming up to protect himself. Alex brought his legs up and kicked; his feet slammed into Kaspar's stomach. Alex's back was against the wall, and Kaspar was sent hurtling towards the other side of the module.

The Sabatier knife was right behind him.

It had been hovering there, its deadly point aimed at Kaspar's neck. As Kaspar travelled backwards it went with him, but then the handle came into contact with the wall. The blade entered the city of Beijing and continued its journey, burrowing into the world's surface. Kaspar's body jerked as if he had been electrocuted. Then he was still.

Lying underneath him, Alex watched in disbelief. Kaspar's arms were hanging down towards him. He was in the middle of the module, not touching any surface, suspended there. A string of bright crimson marbles appeared and began to orbit around his head. They grew larger. Now they were golf balls, trailing away, glistening red.

The knife had severed an artery. Kaspar's blood hung around him like a grotesque Christmas decoration.

Alex had had enough. The module was heating up rapidly, still exposed to the sun, and he reached out and closed the shutter. A shadow fell across Kaspar's face. The marbles darkened.

With his skin crawling, wanting to get away from the obscene, floating body, Alex dragged himself into the next module using a series of Velcro grips. He found himself next to a space toilet, a grey plastic box with some sort of cone device floating at the end of a pipe. He needed to use it. He was

going to be sick. Grimly he swallowed, forcing himself to stay calm. He didn't want to find out what vomit looked like in outer space.

The bomb...

How much time did he have left? Alex looked at his watch. One minute past four. Just twenty-nine minutes left. He had to move quickly. To have come so far, to have been through so much, only to die now! He forced himself to concentrate, to control his movements. He remembered the map he had been shown in the control centre. He knew where he had to go.

The hatch leading into the capsule that had brought Kaspar into space was open, and Alex saw the bomb at once. It was shaped like a torpedo, black, with six tiny switches and a glass panel with a digital read-out.

The whole thing was strapped to the wall, held in place with Velcro. With a ghastly sort of fascination, Alex lowered himself into the module and floated next to it. There was a six-figure display, rapidly counting down: 27:07:05. Alex checked it against his watch. Yes. Three minutes past four. He had just twenty-seven minutes left.

Could he turn it off? Alex examined the switches but there were no symbols, nothing to tell him what function they performed. Did he dare press one? If he made a mistake, he'd be blown to smithereens. He reached out a finger. His mouth was dry. Being so close to the bomb filled him with horror. But he had to try, didn't he? Drevin might have perverted the genius of Ark Angel but, even so, the space station was a technological miracle, completely unique, the world's first hotel in orbit around the earth. Could Alex really allow it to be destroyed? His finger rested against the top switch. All he had to do was flick it. It might deactivate the bomb, but it might set it off. The question was, did he dare take the risk?

The numbers in the display were still counting down. Now they showed 25:33:00.

Alex swore. Why didn't they have some sort of rubbish chute? Then he could get rid of the bomb, jettison it into outer space. There probably was an airlock on Ark Angel, but he had no idea how to operate it.

Anyway, there was no time. His finger was still touching the switch. One of six switches. A one in six chance of getting it right.

Not good enough.

Alex let out a long, shuddering breath and withdrew his hand. He took hold of the still-ticking bomb and gently unfastened it, then eased it up through the hatch and back into the centre of the space hotel. Ed Shulsky had told him where to leave it, but Alex made the decision for himself. The toilet. Somehow it seemed a fitting end. He lowered the nose of the torpedo into it and left it there.

It was time to go.

He pushed himself off as gently as he could and was rewarded with a slow, careful progression back towards the waiting module of the Soyuz. He passed underneath Kaspar, taking care not to look up. In a few minutes' time, the dead man was going to be given one of the most spectacular cremations anyone could ask for. It was more than he deserved.

The docking station was ahead of him—but there was one last thing he had to do. He looked at his watch.

Eleven minutes past four. There were just nineteen minutes remaining, and Alex knew it was madness to waste even a few seconds. But he would never have this opportunity again. He found another window on the opposite side from the sun, opened the shutter and looked out.

And there it was.

Planet earth. Seen from outer space.

His first thought was how big it was; his second, how small. Of course, he had seen images of the earth taken by astronauts. But this was different. He was seeing it with his own eyes. And he was moving. As he crouched in front of the porthole, he was travelling so fast that it would take him just ninety minutes to go all the way round. No wonder it seemed small. And yet the earth filled his vision. All the life in the universe, five billion people, was concentrated there. And the thought of that was enormous.

He was struck by the colours. No photographs could have prepared him for the sheer iridescence of the planet. It looked as if it were lit from inside. At first it seemed that everything was blue and white—most of the planet was water—and Alex remembered lying on his back when he was small, staring at a perfect summer sky. If he could have turned the sky into a ball, that was what he was seeing now. But as he gazed down he began to make out the shape of the coastlines, a thin line of emerald green; and then Ark Angel turned the corner of the world and there was Africa—all of Africa ahead of him—and suddenly he was seeing intense gold, yellow and red ... mountains and deserts but no cities. Nothing moving. And he wondered, if he was an alien and came upon the earth, could he pass by without being aware of the teeming life below?

But then day became night and he found himself over the western Mediterranean seaboard, and even from three hundred miles away he could make out thousands of electric lights that had to be man-made. Spain and Gibraltar, Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria and the Lebanon—all of them were visible at once, the tiny lights blinking like fireflies. There were storms over Europe. Alex saw the lightning shimmer through the clouds.

It wasn't just that there was life on earth. The whole earth was alive. Alex could feel it pulsating beneath him, and suddenly he knew that for all its technology, Ark Angel was a sterile, dead place and he didn't care that soon it would no longer exist. He had made the right decision. At that moment, Alex felt a sense of loneliness he would remember for the rest of his life. He wanted to go home.

He made his way back to the Soyuz module, trying to control his progress but still crashing into the walls.

Only by holding onto the handrails did he prevent himself from going into another sickening spin. He had a raging thirst and wished he'd found himself something to drink before he left. What happened when you opened a can of Coke in space? He would never find out.

Somehow he reached the entrance and folded himself in. He was operating on automatic. All he wanted was to get away. He reached up and closed the hatch, turning the lever to lock it before blastoff. This was the compartment he had travelled up in. But it was going to stay behind. There was

a second hatch underneath him and he opened it, passing into the re-entry module below. There was more room here. Of course. The re-entry module had to be big enough for Kaspar. He strapped himself into the seat, found another headset and put it on, wondering if it would work.

“Alex? What is your status?” It was Tamara’s voice. He had never been happier to hear anyone.

“The bomb is still active,” he said. He looked at his watch. Twenty-five past four. “Professor Sing lied to us,” he went on. “Kaspar was here. And now I’ve only got five minutes left. Get me out of here.”

Another burst of static. A disembodied voice was muttering half-words that made no sense. There had to be something wrong with the radio. Alex wondered what would happen next. How long would he have to sit here before he disengaged? And what would happen if he didn’t? The second hand on his watch ticked round. It seemed to be taunting him, moving faster than it should. The time now was twenty-eight minutes past four.

Already he was sweating. Hunched up on his back with no view, he had no idea where he was, how much further he was around the world. Twenty-nine minutes past four. Had he reached the last sixty seconds of his life?

He felt a sudden jolt. For a terrible moment, he thought that the bomb had detonated. Then he realized that was impossible. He hadn’t heard anything but he was suddenly aware that the module’s retro-rockets must have been fired. He twisted his head round and peered through the periscope. Ark Angel was already a mile away, vanishing into space like a pebble dropped into a well.

And then it exploded.

The bomb blew up, a burst of orange flame that ripped the entire space station apart, sending the different modules spinning in different directions. The arms with the solar panels fell away. There were two more explosions. A shower of brilliant sparks and a dazzling burst of white light that stretched out in silence.

Alex felt a sense of euphoria. He had succeeded! He had put the bomb in exactly the right place, and instead of propelling Ark Angel towards Washington, it had simply destroyed it. There was nothing left. A few pieces were falling through space but they would quickly burn up. At last it was over.

He fell.

The crackle on the radio stopped abruptly. Alex found himself in the grip of a silence so complete that for a moment he thought he might have died, and he had to remind himself he wasn’t home yet. He was plummeting down, feet forward, moving at eighteen thousand miles an hour. Five miles a second. This was the most dangerous part of the entire journey. If the control centre had miscalculated, he would be incinerated. Already he was aware of a pink glow outside the window as the module began to rub against the earth’s upper atmosphere.

And then he was on fire. The whole world was on fire. The very air was breaking up, being smashed to pieces, the electrons separating from the nuclei.

The module had become a fireball, and Alex knew that his life depended on the hundreds of thermal tiles that surrounded him. He was in the heart of a living hell.

He yelled out. He couldn’t help himself.

Then the red disappeared, like a curtain being torn apart.

He saw blue.

There was a second, back-breaking jolt as the parachute deployed. The world seemed to shimmer on the other side of the window and Alex saw the Pacific Ocean spread out before him.

A splash. Steam. Waves lashing at the windows. Sunlight turning the water into diamonds.

And at last silence.

He was rocking back and forth, a hundred miles off the eastern coast of Australia. The wrong side of the world—but that didn't matter.

Alex Rider was back.

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Saving the world one mission at a time

ALEX RIDER

SNAKEHEAD



ANTHONY HOROWITZ

#1 New York Times bestselling author

Snakehead

Alex Rider [7]

Horowitz, Anthony

Walker Books Ltd (2008)

Rating: ★★★★★☆

Product Description

Alex Rider bites back. Splashing down off the coast of Australia, Alex is soon working undercover - this time for ASIS, the Australian Secret Service - on a mission to infiltrate the criminal underworld of South-East Asia: the ruthless world of the Snakehead. Faced with an old enemy and troubled by the shadows of his own past, Alex is caught between two secret services, with no one he can trust - and this time he needs all his wits to survive.

About the Author

Anthony Horowitz is the creator of the phenomenal Alex Rider books and the bestselling Power of Five series and was recently voted the 2007 BA/Nielsen Author of the Year. He won the 2006 British Book Awards Children's Book of the Year for Ark Angel and the 2003 Red House Children's Book of the Year Award for Skeleton Key. Anthony, who wrote the script for the Alex Rider movie Stormbreaker, also writes extensively for TV, with credits including Midsomer Murders and Foyle's War. He lives in London.

Snakehead

Snakehead

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

PHILOMEL BOOKS

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THE ALEX RIDER ADVENTURES:

Stormbreaker

Point Blank

Skeleton Key

Eagle Strike

Scorpia

Ark Angel

THE DIAMOND BROTHERS MYSTERIES:

The Falcon's Malteser

Public Enemy Number Two

Three of Diamonds

South by Southeast

Horowitz Horror

More Horowitz Horror

The Devil and His Boy

Snakehead

DOWN TO EARTH

SPLASHDOWN.

Alex Rider would never forget the moment of impact, the first shock as the parachute opened and the second—more jolting still—as the module that had carried him back from outer space crashed into the sea. Was it his imagination, or was there steam rising up all around him? Maybe it was sea spray. It didn't matter. He was back. That was all he cared about. He had made it. He was still alive.

He was still lying on his back, crammed into the tiny space with his knees tucked into his chest. Half closing his eyes, Alex experienced a moment of extraordinary stillness. He was completely still. His fists were clenched. He wasn't breathing. Was it really true? Already he found it impossible to believe that the events that had led to his journey into outer space had really taken place. He tried to imagine himself hurtling around the earth at seventeen and a half thousand miles an hour. It couldn't have happened. It had surely all been part of some incredible dream.

Slowly he forced himself to unwind. He lifted an arm. It rose normally. He could feel the muscle connecting. Just minutes before he had been in zero gravity. But as he rested, trying to collect his thoughts, he realized that once again his body belonged to him.

Alex wasn't sure how long he was left on his own, floating on the water somewhere...it could have been anywhere in the world. But when things happened, they did so very quickly. First there was the hammering of helicopter blades. Then the whoop of some sort of siren. He could see very little out the window—just the rise and fall of the ocean—but suddenly a man was there, a scuba diver, a palm slamming against the glass. A few seconds later, the capsule was opened from outside. Fresh air came rushing in, and to Alex it smelled delicious. At the same time, a man loomed over him, his body wrapped in neoprene, his eyes behind a mask.

“Are you okay?”

Alex could hardly make out the words, there was so much noise outside. Did the diver have an American accent? “I'm fine,” he managed to shout back. But it wasn't true. He was beginning to feel sick. There was a shooting pain behind his eyes.

“Don't worry! We'll soon have you out of there...”

It took them a while. Alex had only been in space a short time, but he'd never had any physical training for it, and now his muscles were turning against him, reluctant to start pulling their own weight. He had to be manhandled out of the capsule, into the blinding sun of a Pacific afternoon. Everything was chaotic. There was a helicopter overhead, the blades beating at the ocean, forming patterns that rippled and vibrated. Alex turned his head and saw—impossibly—an aircraft carrier, as big as a mountain, looming out of the water less than a quarter of a mile away. It was flying the Stars and Stripes. So he had been right about the diver. He must have landed somewhere off the coast of America.

There were two more divers in the water, bobbing up and down next to the capsule, and Alex could see a third man leaning out of the helicopter directly above him. He knew what was going to happen, and he didn't resist. First a loop of cable was passed around his chest and connected. He felt it tighten under his arms. And then he was rising into the air, still in his space suit, dangling like a

silver puppet as he was winched up.

And already they knew. He had glimpsed it in the eyes of the diver who had spoken to him. The disbelief. These men—the helicopter, the aircraft carrier—had been rushed out to rendezvous with a module that had just reentered the earth's atmosphere. And inside, they had found a boy. A fourteen-year-old had just plummeted a hundred miles from outer space. These men would be sworn to secrecy, of course. MI6 would see to that. They would never talk about what had happened. Nor would they forget it.

There was a medical officer waiting for him on board the USS *Kitty Hawk*—which was the name of the ship that had been diverted to pick him up. His name was Josh Cook, and he was forty years old, black with wire-frame glasses and a pleasant, soft-spoken manner. He helped Alex out of the space suit and stayed in the room when Alex finally did throw up. It turned out that he'd dealt with astronauts before.

"They're all sick when they come down," he explained. "It goes with the territory. Or maybe I should say terra firma. That's Latin for 'down to earth.' You'll be fine by the morning."

"Where am I?" Alex asked.

"You're about ninety miles off the coast of Australia. We were on a training exercise when we got a red alert that you were on your way down."

"So what happens now?"

"Now you have a shower and get some sleep. You're in luck. We've got a mattress made out of memory foam. It was actually developed by NASA. It'll give your muscles a chance to get used to being back in full gravity."

Alex had been given a private cabin in the medical department of the *Kitty Hawk*—in fact, a fully equipped "hospital at sea" with sixty-five beds, an operating room, a pharmacy, and everything else that 5,500 sailors might need. It wasn't huge, but he suspected that nobody else on the *Kitty Hawk* would have this much space. Cook went over to the corner and pulled back a plastic curtain to reveal a shower cubicle.

"You may find it difficult to walk," he explained. "You're going to be unsteady on your feet for at least twenty-four hours. If you like, I can wait in the room until you've showered."

"I'll be okay," Alex said.

"All right." Cook smiled and opened the main door. But before he left, he looked back at Alex. "You know—every man and woman on this ship is talking about you," he said. "There are a whole pile of questions I'd like to ask you, but I'm under strict orders from the captain to keep my mouth shut. Even so, I want you to know that I've been at sea for a long, long time and I've never encountered anything like this. A kid in outer space!" He nodded one last time. "I hope you have a good rest. There's a call button beside the bed if there's anything you need."

Cook left.

It took Alex ten minutes to get into the shower. He had completely lost his sense of balance, and the roll of the ship didn't help. He turned the temperature up as high as he could bear and stood under the steaming water, enjoying the rush of it over his shoulders and through his hair. Then he dried himself

and got into bed. The memory foam was only a couple of inches thick, but it seemed to mold itself to the shape of his body exactly. He fell almost instantly into a deep but troubled sleep.

He didn't dream about the Ark Angel space station or his knife fight with Kaspar, the bald ecoterrorist who had been determined to kill him even though it was clear that all was lost. Nor did he dream about Nikolei Drevin, the billionaire who had been behind it all.

But it did seem to him that, sometime in the middle of the night, he heard the whisper of voices that he didn't recognize but that, somehow, he still knew. Old friends. Or old enemies. It didn't matter which because he couldn't make out what they were saying, and anyway, a moment later they were swept away down the dark river of his sleep.

Perhaps it was a premonition.

Because three weeks before, seven men had met in a room in London to discuss an operation that would make them many millions of dollars and would change the shape of the world. And although Alex had never met any of them, he certainly knew them.

Scorpia was back again.

“DEATH IS NOT THE END”

IT WAS THE SORT of building you could walk past without noticing: three stories high, painted white with ivy, perfectly trimmed, climbing up to the roof. It stood about halfway down Sloane Street in Belgravia, just around the corner from Harrods, surrounded by some of the most expensive real estate in London. On one side there was a jewelry shop and on the other an Italian fashion boutique—but the customers who came here would no longer be needing either. A single step led up to a door painted black, and there was a window that contained an urn, a vase of fresh flowers, and nothing else. The name of the place was written in discreet gold letters. It read: Reed and Kelly, Funeral Directors. And beneath that, a brief motto: Death is not the End.

At ten thirty on a bright October morning, exactly three weeks before Alex landed in the Pacific Ocean, a black Lexus LS 430 four-door sedan drew up outside the front door. The car had been chosen carefully. It was a luxury model, but there was nothing too special about it, nothing to attract the eye. The arrival had also been exactly timed. In the past fifteen minutes, three other vehicles and a taxi had briefly pulled up and their passengers, either singly or in pairs, had exited, crossed the pavement, and entered the parlor. If anyone had been watching, they would have assumed that a large family had gathered to make the final arrangements for someone who had recently departed.

The last person to arrive was a powerfully built man with massive shoulders and a shaved head. There was something quite brutal about his face: the small, squashed-up nose, thick lips, and muddy brown eyes. But his clothes were immaculate. He wore a tailored silk shirt, a dark suit, and a cashmere coat, hanging loose. There was a large platinum ring on his fourth finger. He had been smoking a cigar, but as he stepped from the car, he dropped it and ground it out with a brilliantly polished shoe. Without looking left or right, he crossed the pavement and entered the building. An old-fashioned bell on a spring jangled as the door opened and closed.

He found himself in a wood-paneled reception room where an elderly, gray-haired man, also wearing a suit, sat with his hands folded behind a narrow desk. He looked at the new arrival with a mixture of sympathy and politeness.

“Good morning,” he said. “How can we be of service?”

“I have come about a death,” the visitor replied.

“Someone close to you?”

“My brother. But I hadn’t seen him for some years.”

“You have my condolences.”

The same words had been spoken seven times that morning. If even one syllable had been changed, the bald man would have turned around and left. But he knew now that the building was secure. He hadn’t been followed. The meeting that had been arranged just twenty-four hours earlier could go ahead.

The older man leaned forward and pressed a button concealed underneath the desk. At once, a

section of the wooden paneling clicked open to reveal a staircase, leading up to the second floor.

Reed and Kelly was a real business. There once had been a Jonathan Reed and a Sebastian Kelly, and for more than fifty years they had arranged funerals and cremations until, at last, the time had come to arrange their own. After that, the undertaker's had been purchased by a perfectly legitimate company and registered in Zurich, and it had continued to provide a first-class service for anyone who lived—or rather, *had* lived—in the area. But that was no longer the only purpose of the building in Sloane Street. It had also become the London headquarters of the international criminal organization that went by the name of Scorpia.

The name stood for “sabotage, corruption, intelligence, and assassination,” which were its four main activities. The organization had been formed some thirty years before in Paris, its members being spies from different intelligence networks around the world who had decided to go into business for themselves. There had been twelve of them at first. Then one had died of illness and two had been killed in the field. The other nine had congratulated themselves on surviving so long with so few casualties.

But quite recently, things had taken a turn for the worse. The oldest member of the organization had made the foolish and inexplicable decision to retire, which had, of course, led to his being murdered immediately. Soon afterward, his successor, a woman called Julia Rothman, had also been killed. That had been at the end of an operation—Invisible Sword—that had gone catastrophically wrong. In many ways this was the lowest point in Scorpia's history, and there were many who thought that the organization would never recover. After all, the agent who had beaten them, destroyed the operation, and caused the death of Mrs. Rothman had been fourteen years old.

However, Scorpia had not given in. They had taken swift revenge on the boy and gone straight back to work. Invisible Sword was just one of many projects needing their attention, for they were in constant demand from governments, terrorist groups, big business...in fact, anyone who could pay. And now they were active once again. They had come to this address in London to discuss a relatively small assignment but one that would net them ten million dollars, to be paid in uncut diamonds...easier to carry and harder to trace than banknotes.

The stairs led to a short corridor on the first floor with a single door at the end. One television camera had watched the bald man on his way up. A second followed him as he stepped onto a strange metal platform in front of the door and looked into a glass panel set in the wall. Behind the glass, there was a biometric scanner that took an instant image of the unique pattern of blood vessels on the retina behind his eye and matched them against a computer at the reception desk below. If an enemy agent had tried to gain access to the room, he would have triggered a ten-thousand-volt electric charge through the metal floor plate, incinerating him instantly. But this was no enemy. The man's name was Zeljan Kurst, and he had been with Scorpia almost from the beginning. The door slid open, and he went in.

He found himself in a long, narrow room with three windows covered by blinds and plain, white walls with no decoration of any kind. There was a glass table surrounded by leather chairs and no sign of any pens, paper, or printed documents. Nothing was ever written down at these meetings. Nor was anything recorded. Six men were waiting for him as he took his place at the head of the table. Following the disaster of Invisible Sword, now just the seven of them were left.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Kurst began. He spoke with a strange, mid-European accent. The last

word had sounded like “chintlemen.” All the men at the table were equal partners, but he was currently the acting head. A new chief executive was chosen as fresh projects arrived.

Nobody replied. These people were not friends. They had nothing to say to each other outside the work at hand.

“We have been given a most interesting and challenging assignment,” Kurst went on. “I need hardly remind you that our reputation was quite seriously damaged earlier this year. In addition to providing us with a much-needed financial injection following the heavy losses we sustained on ‘Invisible Sword,’ this new project will put us back on the map. Our task is this. We are to assassinate eight extremely wealthy and influential people exactly one month from now. They will all be in one place at one time, which provides us with the ideal opportunity. It has been left to us to decide on the method.”

Zeljko Kurst had been the head of the police force in Yugoslavia during the 1980s and had been famous for his love of classical music—particularly Mozart—and extreme violence. It was said that he would interrogate prisoners with either an opera or a symphony playing in the background and that those who survived the ordeal would never be able to listen to that piece of music again. But he had seen the breakup of his country on the horizon and had decided to quit before he was out of a job. And so he had changed sides. He had no family, no friends, and nowhere he could call home. He needed work, and he knew that Scorpia would pay him extremely well.

His eyes flickered around the table, waiting for a response. “You will have read in the newspapers,” he continued, “that the G8 summit is taking place in Rome this November. This is a meeting of the eight most powerful heads of government, and as usual they will talk a great deal, have their photographs taken, consume a lot of expensive food and wine...and do absolutely nothing. They are of no interest to us. They are, in effect, irrelevant.

“However, at the same time, another meeting will be taking place on the other side of the world. It has been arranged in direct competition with the G8 summit, and you might say that the timing is something of a publicity stunt. Nonetheless, it has already attracted much more attention than G8. Indeed, the politicians have almost been forgotten. Instead, the eyes of the world are on Reef Island, just off the coast of northwest Australia in the Timor Sea.

“The press have given this alternative summit a name: Reef Encounter. A group of eight people will be coming together, and their names will be known to you. One of them is a pop singer named Rob Goldman. He has apparently raised millions for charity with concerts all over the world. One is a billionaire, among the top-ten richest men on the planet. He created a huge property empire, but he is now giving his fortune away to developing countries. There is an ex-president of the United States. A famous Hollywood actress—Eve Taylor. She actually owns the island. And so on.” Kurst didn’t even try to keep the contempt out of his voice. “They are amateurs, do-gooders...but they are also powerful and popular, which makes them dangerous.

“Their aim, as they put it, is ‘to make poverty history.’ In order to achieve this, they have made certain demands, including the cancellation of world debt. They want millions of dollars to be sent to Africa to fight AIDS and malaria. They have called for an end to war in the Middle East. It will come as no surprise to those of us in this room that there are many governments and business interests who do not agree with these aims. After all, it is not possible to give to the poor without taking from the rich, and anyway, poverty has its uses. It keeps people in their place. It also helps to hold prices

down.

“A representative of one of the governments has been in contact with us. He has decided that the Reef Encounter should end the moment it begins—certainly before any of these meddlers begin to address the television cameras of the world—and that is our assignment. Disrupting the conference is not enough. All eight of them are to be killed. The fact that they will all be in one place at one time makes it easier for us. Not one of them must leave Reef Island alive.”

One of the other men leaned forward. His name was Levi Kroll. He was an Israeli and about fifty years old. Very little of his face could be seen. Most of it was covered by a beard, and there was a patch covering the eye that he had once, by accident, shot out. “It is a simple matter,” he rasped. “I could go out this afternoon and hire an Apache helicopter gunship. Let us say two thousand rounds of 30-millimeter cannon fire and a few Hellfire air-to-ground laser-guided missiles and this conference would no longer exist.”

“Unfortunately, it isn’t quite as straightforward as that,” Kurst replied. “As I said in my opening remarks, this is a particularly challenging assignment. Why? Because our client does not wish the Reef Island eight to become martyrs. If they were seen to be assassinated, it would only add weight to their cause. And so he has specified that the deaths must seem accidental. In fact, this is critical. There cannot be even the tiniest amount of doubt or suspicion.”

There was a soft murmur around the table as the other members of Scorpia took this new information on board. To kill one person in a way that would arouse no suspicion was simple. But to do the same for eight people on a remote island that would doubtless have a tight security system... that was quite another matter.

“There are certain chemical nerve agents...,” someone muttered. He was French, exquisitely dressed with a black silk handkerchief poking out of his top pocket. His voice was matter-of-fact.

“How about R-5?” Mr. Mikato suggested. He was a Japanese man with a diamond set in his tooth and—it was rumored—Yakuza tattoos all over his body. “It’s the virus that we supplied to Herod Sayle. Perhaps we could feed it into the island’s water supply...”

“Gentlemen, both of these methods would be effective but still might show up in the subsequent investigation.” Kurst shook his head. “What we require is a natural disaster, but one that we control. We need to eliminate the entire island with everybody on it, but in such a way that no questions will ever be asked.”

He paused, then turned to the man sitting at the end of the table opposite him. “Major Yu?” he asked. “Have you given the matter your consideration?”

“Absolutely...”

Major Winston Yu was at least sixty years old, and although he still had a full head of hair, it had turned completely white. The hair looked artificial, cut in the style of a schoolboy with a straight line above the eyes and the whole thing perched on top of a head that was yellow and waxy and that had shrunk like an overripe fruit. He was the least impressive person in the room, with circular glasses, thin lips, and hands that would have been small on a child. Everything about him was somehow delicate. He had been sitting very still at the table as if he was afraid he might break. An ornamental walking stick with a silver scorpion entwined around the handle rested against his chair. He wore a white suit and pale gray gloves.

“I have taken a very careful look at this operation,” he continued. He had a perfect English accent. “And I am happy to report that although on the face of it this seems to be a rather difficult business, we have been blessed with three very fortunate circumstances. First, this island, Reef Island, is in exactly the right place. Second, December 2, just a few weeks from now, will be exactly the right time. And third, the weapon that we require just happens to be here in England, in fact, less than thirty miles from where we are sitting now.”

“And what weapon is that?” the Frenchman demanded.

“It’s a bomb. But a very special bomb...a prototype. As far as I know, there is only one in existence. The British have given it a code name. They call it Royal Blue.”

“Major Yu is absolutely right,” Kurst cut in. “Royal Blue is currently in a highly secret weapons facility just outside London. That is why I chose to hold the meeting here today. The building has been under surveillance for the past month, and a team is already waiting on standby. By this evening, the bomb will be in our possession. After that, Major Yu, I am placing this operation in your hands.”

Major Yu nodded slowly.

“With respect, Mr. Kurst,” It was Levi Kroll speaking. His voice was ugly, and there was very little respect in it. “I was under the impression that *I* would be in command of the next operation.”

“I am afraid you will have to wait, Mr. Kroll. As soon as Royal Blue is in our hands, it will be flown to Jakarta and then carried by sea to its final destination. This is a region of the world where you have no working experience. For Major Yu, however, it is another matter. Over the past seven years he has been active in Bangkok, Jakarta, Bali, and Lombok. He also has a base in northern Australia. He has constructed and now controls a huge criminal network that goes by the name of *shetou*— or, in English, snakehead. They will smuggle the weapon for us. The snakehead is a formidable organization, and in this instance it is best suited to our needs.”

The Israeli nodded briefly. “You are right. I apologize for my interruption.”

“I accept your apology,” Kurst replied, although he hadn’t. It occurred to him that one day Levi Kroll might have to go. The man spoke too often without thinking first.

There was little left to be said. Winston Yu took off his glasses and polished them, using his gloved fingers. His eyes were a strange, almost metallic gray with lids that folded in on themselves. “I will contact my people in Bangkok and warn them the machine is on its way. I already have some thoughts as to its location with regard to Reef Island. And as to this conference with its high ideals, you need have no worries. I am very happy to assure you...it will never take place.”

At six o’clock in the evening, two days later, a blue Renault Megane turned off the M11 highway, taking an exit marked Service Vehicles Only. There are many such turnings on the British highway system. Thousands of vehicles roar past them every hour, and the drivers never glance at them twice. And indeed, the great majority of them are completely innocent, leading to service areas or to police traffic control centers. But the highway system has its secrets too. As the Renault made its way slowly forward and came to a shuddering halt in front of what looked like a single-story office compound, it was tracked by three television cameras, and the security men inside went onto immediate alert.

The building was in fact a laboratory and weapons research center, belonging to the Ministry of

Defense. Very few people knew of its existence, and even fewer were allowed in or out. The car that had just arrived was unauthorized and the two security men—both of them recruited from the special forces—should have immediately raised the alarm. That was the protocol.

But the Renault Megane is one of the most innocent and ordinary of family cars, and this one had clearly been involved in a bad accident. The windshield had shattered. The hood was crumpled, and steam was rising from the grille. A man wearing a green anorak and a cap was in the driving seat. There was a woman next to him with blood pouring down the side of her face. Worse than that, there were two small children in the backseat, and although the image on the television screen was a little fuzzy, they seemed to be in a bad way. Neither of them was moving. The woman managed to get out of the car—but then she collapsed. Her husband sat where he was as if dazed.

The two security men ran out to them. It was human nature. Here was a young family that needed help, and anyway, it wasn't that much of a security risk. The front door of the building swung shut behind them and would need a seven-digit code to open again. Both men carried radio transmitters and nine-millimeter Browning automatic pistols underneath their jackets. The Browning is an old weapon, but it's a very reliable one, making it a favorite with the special forces.

The woman was still lying on the ground. The man who had been driving managed to open the door as the two men arrived.

“What happened?” one of them asked.

It was only now, when it was too late, that they began to realize that none of this added up. A car that had crashed on the highway would have simply pulled onto the hard shoulder—if it had been able to drive at all. And how come it was only this one car, with these four people, that had been involved? Where were the other drivers? Where were the police? But any last doubt was removed when the two security men reached the car. The two children in the backseat were dummies. With their cheap wigs and plastic smiles they were like something out of a nightmare.

The woman on the ground twisted around, a machine pistol appearing in her hand. She shot the first of the security guards in the chest. The second was moving quickly, reaching for his own weapon, taking up a combat stance. He never had a chance. The driver had been balancing a silenced micro-Uzi submachine gun on his lap. He tilted it and pulled the trigger. The gun barely whispered as it fired twenty rounds in less than a second. The guard was flung away.

The couple were already up and running toward the building. They couldn't get in yet, but they didn't need to. They made their way toward the back, where a silver box, about two yards square, had been attached to the brickwork. The man carried a tool kit that he had brought from the car. The woman stopped briefly and fired three times, taking out all the cameras. At the same time, an ambulance appeared, driving up from the highway. It drew in behind the parked car.

The next phase of the mission took very little time. The facility was equipped with a standard CBR air filtration system—the letters stood for “chemical, biological, and radioactive.” It was designed to counter an enemy attack, but in fact the exact opposite was about to happen as the enemy turned the system against itself. The man took a miniaturized oxyacetylene torch out of his toolbox and used it to burn out the screws. This allowed him to unfasten a metal panel, revealing a complicated tangle of pipes and wires. From somewhere inside his anorak, he produced a gas mask, which he strapped over his face. He reached back into his toolbox and took out a metal vial, a few inches long, with a

nozzle and a spike. The man knew exactly what he was doing. Using the heel of his hand, he jammed the spike into one of the pipes. Finally, he turned the nozzle.

The hiss was almost inaudible as a stream of potassium cyanide mixed with the air circulating inside the building. Meanwhile, four men dressed as paramedics but all wearing gas masks had approached the front door. One of them pressed a magnetized box, no bigger than a cigarette pack, against the lock. He stepped back. There was an explosion. The door swung open.

It was early evening, and only half a dozen people had still been working inside the facility. Most of them were technicians. One was an armed security guard. He had been trying to make a telephone call when the gas had hit him. He was lying on the floor, a look of surprise on his face. The receiver was still in his hand.

Through the entrance hall, down a corridor, and through a door marked RESTRICTED AREA...the four paramedics knew exactly where they were going. The bomb was in front of them. It looked remarkably old-fashioned, like something out of World War II—a huge metal cylinder, silver in color, flat at one end, pointed at the other. Only a data screen, built into the side, and a series of digital controls brought it back into the twenty-first century. It was strapped down to a power-assisted cart, and the whole thing would fit inside the ambulance with just inches to spare. But that, of course, was why the ambulance had been chosen.

They guided it back down the corridor and out through the front door. The ambulance was equipped with a ramp, and it rolled smoothly into the back, allowing room for the driver and one passenger in the front. The other three men and the woman climbed into the car. The dummies of the children were left behind. The entire operation had taken eight and a half minutes. Thirty seconds less than planned.

An hour later, by the time the alarm had been raised in London and other parts of the country, everyone involved had disappeared. They had discarded the wigs, contact lenses, and facial padding that had completely changed their appearance. The two vehicles had been incinerated.

And the weapon known as Royal Blue had already begun its journey east.

VISA PROBLEMS

“ALEX RIDER.”

The blind man spoke the two words as if they had only just occurred to him. He let them roll over his tongue, tasting them like a fine wine. He was sitting in a soft leather armchair, the sort of furniture that would have been normal in an executive office but that was surprising in a plane, twenty-five thousand feet above Adelaide. The plane was a Gulfstream V executive jet that had been specially adapted for its current use, equipped with a kitchen and bathroom, a satellite link for worldwide communications, a forty-inch plasma TV connected to three twenty-four-hour news services, and a bank of computers. There was even a basket for Garth, the blind man’s guide dog.

The man’s name was Ethan Brooke, and he was the chief executive of the Covert Action Division of ASIS—the Australian Secret Intelligence Service. His department was inevitably known as CAD, but only by the people who worked in it. Very few other people even knew it existed.

Brooke was a large man, in his mid-fifties, with sand-colored hair and ruddy, weather-beaten cheeks that suggested years spent outdoors. He had indeed been a soldier, a lieutenant colonel with the commandos, until a land mine in East Timor had sent him first into the hospital for three months and then into a new career in intelligence. He wore Armani sunglasses, tinted silver, rather than the traditional black glasses of a blind man, and his clothes were casual: jeans, a jacket, and an open-neck shirt. A senior minister in the Australian defense department had once complained about the way he dressed. That same minister was now carrying luggage in a three-star Sydney hotel.

He was not alone. Sitting opposite him was a second man, almost half his age, slim, with short, fair hair. He was wearing a suit. Marc Damon had applied to join Australian intelligence the day after he had left the university. He had done this by breaking into the main offices of ASIS in Canberra and leaving his application on Brooke’s desk. The two of them had now worked together for six years.

It was Damon who had produced the file—marked TOP SECRET: CAD EYES ONLY—that lay on the table between them. Although its contents had been translated into Braille, Brooke no longer had any need to refer to them. He had read the pages once and had instantly memorized their contents. He now knew everything he needed about the boy called Alex Rider. The only part that was missing from his consciousness was a true picture of the fourteen-year-old. There was a photograph attached to the cover, but as always he had been forced to rely on the official report:

Physical description/attributes

Subject is five feet, seven inches tall, still short for his age, but this adds to his operational value. Weight: 140 pounds. Hair color: fair. Eyes: brown. His physical condition is excellent but may have been compromised by his recent injury (see Scorpia file). The boy is known to be fluent in two languages—French and Spanish—and is also proficient in German. He has practiced karate since the age of eight and has reached first *kyu* grade (black belt). Weapons training: none. Progress at school has been slow, with negative feedback from many of his teachers. Spring and summer reports from

Brookland School are attached. However, it must be remembered that he has been absent from class for much of the past nine months.

Psychological profile

AR was recruited by the Special Operations Division of MI6 in March of this year, age fourteen years and one month. His father was John Rider—alias Hunter—who was killed in action. His mother died at the same time, and he was brought up by his uncle, Ian Rider, also an active agent with MI6.

It seems certain that the boy was physically and mentally prepared for intelligence work from the earliest age. Quite apart from the languages and martial arts, Ian Rider equipped him with many skills, including fencing, mountain climbing, white-water rafting, and scuba diving.

And yet, despite his obvious aptitude for intelligence work (see below), AR has shown little enthusiasm for it. Like most teenagers, he is not a patriot and has no interest in politics. MI6 (SO) found it necessary to coerce him to work for them on at least two occasions.

He is popular at school...when he is there. Hobbies: soccer (Chelsea supporter), tennis, music, movies. Evident interest in girls—see separate file on Sabina Pleasure + report by CIA operative Tamara Knight. Lives with American housekeeper, Jack Starbright (note: despite first name she is a female). No ambitions to follow his father or uncle into intelligence.

Past assignments—active service

The British secret service refuses to admit that it has ever employed a juvenile, and so it has been difficult to draw together any concrete evidence of his record as an agent in the field. We believe, however, that he has worked for them on four occasions. He has also been loaned to the United States, where he has been employed by the CIA with equal success at least twice.

United Kingdom: See Herod Sayle: Sayle Enterprises, Cornwall. Dr. Marius Grief: Point Blanc Academy, France. Damian Cray: Cray Software Technology, Amsterdam. Julia Rothman: Scorpia executive. Operation Invisible Sword.

United States: FILES CLOSED. Possible link with General Alexei Sarov—Skeleton Key. Nikolei Drevin—Flamingo Bay (termination of Ark Angel project).

Although it has so far proved impossible to confirm details, it appears that in the space of one year, AR has been involved in six major assignments, succeeding against impossible odds. He has survived assassination attempts by both Scorpia and the Chinese triads.

Current status: available.

Footnote: In 2006, the FBI attempted to recruit a teenage agent to combat drug syndicates operating out of Miami. The boy was killed almost immediately. The experiment has not been repeated.

Secret service files are the same the world over. They are written by people who live in a very black-and-white world and who, by and large, have no time for creative imagination...certainly not if it gets in the way of the facts. The various pages on Alex Rider had given Brooke a vague impression of the boy. They had certainly been enough to set his mind working. But he suspected that they left out as much as they revealed.

“He’s in Australia,” he muttered.

“Yes, sir.” Damon nodded. “He sort of dropped in on us from outer space.”

Brooke smiled. “You know, if anyone else told me that, I’d swear they were yanking my chain. He really went into space?”

“He was pulled out of the sea a hundred miles off the west coast. He was sitting in the reentry module of a Soyuz-Fregat. Of course, the Americans aren’t telling us anything. But it’s probably no coincidence that according to NIWO, the Ark Angel space station blew up at around the same time.”

NIWO is the National Intelligence Watch Office. It employs around 2,000 people who keep up a constant surveillance on everything happening in the world...and outside it.

“That was Drevin’s big idea,” Brooke muttered. “A space hotel.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I always had a feeling he was up to no good.”

There was a moment of turbulence and the plane dipped down. The dog, in its basket, whined. It never had cared much for flying. But then they steadied and continued in their arc over the clouds, heading northeast to Sydney.

“You think we can use him?” Brooke demanded.

“Alex Rider doesn’t like being used,” Damon replied. “And from what I’ve read, there’s no way he’s going to volunteer. But it did occur to me that if we could find some sort of leverage, he would be perfect for what we need. Put a kid into the pipeline and nobody’s going to suspect a thing. It’s exactly the same reason the Americans sent him to Skeleton Key—and it worked for them.”

“Where is he now?”

“They flew him over to Perth, sir. A bit of a hike, but they wanted him somewhere safe and they settled on SAS HQ at Swanbourne. He’s going to need a couple of days to wind down.”

Brooke fell silent. With his eyes permanently covered, it was always difficult to work out what he was thinking—but Damon knew that he would be turning over all the possibilities, that he would come very quickly to a decision and stick by it. Maybe there was no way that ASIS could persuade this English kid to work for them. But if there was a single weakness, anything they could use to their advantage, Brooke would find it.

A moment later he nodded. “We could connect him with Ash,” he said.

And there it was. Simple but brilliant.

“Ash is in Singapore,” Damon said.

“Operational?”

“A routine assignment.”

“As of now he’s reassigned. We’ll put the two of them together and send them in. They’ll make a perfect team.”

Damon couldn’t help smiling. Alex Rider would work with the agent they all called Ash. But there

was just one problem. “You think Ash will work with a teenager?” he asked.

“He will if this kid’s as good as everyone says he is.”

“He’ll need proof of that.”

This time it was Brooke’s turn to smile. “Leave that to me.”

The SAS compound at Swanbourne is a few miles north of Perth and has the appearance of a low-rise vacation village, although perhaps one with more security than most. It stretches out next to the white sand and blue water of the Indian Ocean, sheltered from public view by a series of sand dunes. The buildings are clean, modern, and unremarkable. But for the rise and fall of the barrier at the main gate, the military vehicles passing in and out, and the occasional sighting of men in khaki and black berets, it would be hard to believe that this is the HQ of Australia’s toughest and most elite fighting force.

Alex Rider stood at the window of his room looking out over the main square with the indoor shooting range on one side and the gymnasium and fitness center on the other. He wanted to go home and wondered how long they were going to keep him here. Certainly, his stay on the *Kitty Hawk* had been short enough. He had barely had time to eat breakfast before he had been bundled onto a Hawkeye jet, an oxygen mask strapped over his face, and then blasted off back into the sky. Nobody had even told him where they were taking him, but he had seen the name written in large letters on the airport terminal. Perth. There had been a jeep parked on the runway, and the next thing he knew, he was bouncing through the very ordinary-looking suburb of Swanbourne. The jeep drove into the SAS compound and stopped. A single soldier was waiting for him, his face set, his mouth a straight line that gave nothing away. Alex was shown into a comfortable room with a bed, a TV, and a view of the sand dunes. The door was closed, but it wasn’t locked.

And here he was now. At the end of a journey that had been literally out of this world. He wondered what would happen next.

There was a knock on the door. Alex opened it. A second soldier in green-and-ocher battle fatigues stood in front of him.

“Mr. Rider?”

“I’m Alex.”

“Colonel Abbott sends his compliments. He’d like to speak to you.”

Alex followed the soldier across the compound. For the moment there was nobody else around. The sun was beating down on the empty parade ground. It was almost midday, and the Australian summer was already making itself felt. They reached a bungalow, standing on its own near the edge of the complex. The soldier knocked and, without waiting for an answer, opened the door for Alex to go in.

A thin, businesslike man in his forties was sitting behind a desk, also wearing battle fatigues. He had been writing a report, but he stood up as Alex came in.

“So you’re Alex Rider!” The Australian accent came almost as a surprise. With his short, dark hair and craggy features, Abbott could have been mistaken for an Englishman. He reached out and shook Alex’s hand firmly. “I’m Mike Abbott, and I’m really pleased to meet you, Alex. I’ve heard a lot

about you.” Alex looked surprised, and Abbott laughed. “Six months ago, there was a rumor that the Brits were using a teenage agent. Of course, nobody believed it. But it seems they’ve been keeping you busy, and after you took out Damian Cray...well, I’m afraid you can’t blow up Air Force One in the middle of London without someone hearing about it. But don’t worry! You’re among friends.”

Abbott gestured toward a chair and Alex sat down. “It’s very kind of you, Colonel,” he said. “But I really want to get back home.”

Abbott returned to his own chair. “I can understand that, Alex. And I really want to send you on your way. We just need to fix a couple of things.”

“What things?”

“Well, you landed in Australia without a visa.” Abbott held up two hands before Alex could interrupt. “I know that sounds ridiculous, but it has to be sorted out. As soon as I’ve got the green light, I’ll book you on the first plane back to London.”

“There’s someone I want to call....”

“I suppose you’re thinking about Jack Starbright. Your housekeeper.” Abbott smiled, and Alex wondered how he knew about her. “You’re too late, Alex. She’s been kept fully informed, and she’s already on her way. Her flight left Heathrow about an hour ago, but it’ll take her another twenty-five hours to arrive. The two of you will meet up in Sydney. In the meantime, you’re my guest here at Swanbourne, and I want you to enjoy yourself. We’re right on the beach, and right now it’s the start of the Australian summer. So relax. I’ll let you know as soon as there’s any news about the visa.”

Alex wanted to argue but decided against it. The Colonel seemed friendly enough, but there was something about him that made Alex think twice before speaking. You don’t rise up the ranks of the SAS unless you’re exceptionally tough—and there was certainly steel behind that smile.

“Anything else you want to know?”

“No thanks, Colonel.”

The two of them shook hands. “I’ve asked some of the boys to look after you,” Abbott said. “They’ve been looking forward to meeting you. Just let me know if anyone gives you a hard time.”

When Alex had been training with the SAS in the Brecon Beacons in Wales, a hard time is exactly what he had been given. But from the moment he left the bungalow, he saw that things were going to be different here. There were half a dozen young soldiers waiting for him on the other side, and they all seemed to be easygoing and eager to introduce themselves. Maybe his reputation had gone ahead of him, but he could see right away that the Australian special forces were going to be the complete opposite of their British counterparts.

“It’s great to meet you, Alex.” The man who was speaking was about nineteen and incredibly fit, with a green T-shirt stretched tight over finely chiseled pectorals and arms that filled his sleeves. “I’m Scooter. This is Texas, X-Ray, and Sparks.” At first Alex thought they were using code names. But he quickly realized that they were actually just nicknames. All the other men were in their early twenties and equally fit. “We’re just heading for lunch,” Scooter went on. “You want to join us?”

“Thanks.” Alex hadn’t been given any breakfast, and his stomach was still empty from the day before.

They moved off as a pack. Nobody had even commented on his age. There was clearly no secret who he was. Alex began to feel a little more relaxed. Maybe a day or two here wouldn't be so bad.

From inside the office, Colonel Mike Abbott watched them go. He had an uneasy feeling in his stomach. He was married with three children, and the oldest was only a few years younger than the boy he had just met. He had been impressed. After all he had been through, Alex had a sort of inner calm. Abbott didn't doubt that he could look after himself.

But even so...

He glanced again at the orders that he had received just a few hours ago. It was madness. What was being suggested was simply out of the question. Except that there was no question about it. He had been told exactly what he had to do.

And what if Alex was crippled? What if he was killed?

Not his problem.

The thought didn't comfort him one bit. In twenty years, Mike Abbott had never questioned his commanding officers, but it was with a sense of anger and disbelief that he picked up the telephone and began to issue the instructions for the night ahead.

NO PICNIC

ALEX WAS WORN OUT after all his traveling, and that afternoon he went back to his room and slept. When he was woken up—by the sound of knocking—the day was already drawing to a close. He went over to the door and opened it. The young soldier who had introduced himself as Scooter was standing there. Sparks was with him, holding a cooler.

“How are you doing?” Scooter asked. “We wondered if you’d like to come with us.”

“Where are you going?” Alex asked.

“A picnic on the beach. We’ll set up a barbecue. Maybe swim.” Scooter gestured at the compound behind him. There was nobody in sight. “There’s a big exercise tonight, but we aren’t part of it, and the colonel thought you might like to see a bit of the ocean before you leave.”

The last three words caught Alex’s attention. “Am I leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning. That’s what I’ve heard. So how about it?”

“Sure...” Alex had nothing else to do that evening. He didn’t particularly want to watch TV on his own.

“Great. We’ll pick you up in ten minutes.”

The two men walked off, and it was only much later, when he was ten thousand miles away, that Alex would remember the moment and the way they had glanced at each other as if there was something that bothered them. But if he noticed it at the time, he didn’t register it.

He went back into the room and pulled on his sneakers. The SAS had provided him with some fresh clothes, and he took a combat jacket out of the wardrobe. Scooter had talked about swimming, but the sun was getting lower and Alex had already felt a cool breeze rolling in. He thought for a moment, then took a towel and a spare pair of boxers, which would have to do instead of swimming trunks. Just as he was about to leave, he hesitated. Was this a good idea, heading off down the coast with a group of strangers, some of them as much as ten years older than he was? Suddenly he felt very alone and a long, long way from home. But Jack was on her way. Scooter had told him that he would be leaving the next day. He shook himself out of his mood and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Almost at once, a jeep drew up with Sparks driving and Scooter in the passenger seat. Texas and X-Ray were in the back with bags and coolers, blankets, and a guitar piled up around them. They had left a narrow space for Alex. As he climbed in, he noticed that Texas was balancing an automatic pistol on his lap, testing the mechanism.

“You ever fired one of these?” Texas asked.

Alex shook his head.

“Well, now’s your chance. When we get out there, I’ll set up a few targets. See how you do.”

Once again, Alex couldn't shake off a vague feeling that something was wrong, but then Sparks turned on the radio and with a blast of music from some Australian band he had never heard of, they set off. It was going to be a beautiful evening. There were a few streaks of red in the sky but no clouds, and the sun—close to the horizon—was throwing long, stretched-out shadows across the ground. Scooter was slumped in his seat with one foot resting on the dashboard. X-Ray had his hand up, the wind streaming through his fingers. By the time they had passed through the barrier and hit the main road, Alex had relaxed. He only had one evening in Australia. He might as well enjoy it.

They followed the coast for about ten miles, then turned inland. Why had they come so far? Alex couldn't shake off a sense of unease. After all, the compound at Swanbourne had been right on the beach to begin with.

They had already passed a number of suburban houses and shopping malls, but they soon left those behind, and by the time they had joined a four-lane highway, they were driving through open countryside. None of them spoke. It was impossible in the open-top jeep with the wind rushing past. The music pounded out, but any words were snatched away and lost. After about twenty minutes, Scooter turned around and shouted, "You okay?" Alex nodded. But secretly he was wondering how far they intended to travel and when they would arrive.

The journey took over an hour. They came off the highway and took a road that cut through a wooded area. Then they turned onto a track, and suddenly they were bumping over a rough, uneven surface with eucalyptus and pine trees pressing in on both sides. X-Ray had taken out a map. He leaned forward and tapped Sparks on the shoulder.

"Is this the right way?" he shouted.

"Sure!" Sparks shouted back without looking behind him.

"I think we've come too far!"

"Forget it, X-Ray. This is the right way..."

There was a barrier ahead of them, similar to the one at Swanbourne except that it was old and rusted. There was a sign next to it.

MILITARY ZONE

ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE.

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PLACED UNDER ARREST AND MAY BE IMPRISONED.

Scooter slowed down and, without opening the door, Sparks leapt out of the jeep.

"Where are we?" Alex asked.

"You'll see," Scooter replied. "We come to a load of places around here. You'll like it."

"We've come too far," X-Ray insisted. "We should have turned off a mile back."

Sparks had opened the barrier—it obviously hadn't been locked—and the jeep rolled forward. As it passed him, he leapt back into the passenger seat, and at once Scooter stepped on the accelerator and they shot forward, bumping over roots and potholes.

It had become very dark. The last of the daylight had slipped away without Alex noticing, and suddenly the trees seemed very close, threatening to block the way ahead. The surface was getting worse and worse. Alex had to cling onto the side as he was thrown around, the coolers lifting themselves into the air and hanging there before crashing down again. Leaves and branches flickered briefly, a thousand black shadows caught in the headlights, before they whipped into the windshield and disappeared behind. The track didn't seem to be going anywhere and Alex was having to fight back a sense of unease, wishing he hadn't come, when suddenly they burst through a clump of foliage and came to a shuddering halt with soft sand underneath the wheels. They had arrived.

Scooter turned off the engine, and at once the gentler sounds of the evening surrounded them. Alex could hear the whisper of the breeze and the rhythmic breaking of the waves. They had come to a beautiful place: a private beach that curved around in the shape of a crescent with perfect white sand next to a black-and-silver sea. There was a full moon and a fantastic cluster of stars that seemed to go on forever, stretching to the very ends of the Southern Hemisphere.

"Everybody out!" Scooter shouted. He kicked the door open and tumbled out onto the beach. "X-Ray...get me a Coke. Texas, it's your turn to cook."

"I always cook!" Texas complained.

"Why do you think we invite you?"

X-Ray turned to Alex. "You thirsty?"

Alex nodded, and X-ray threw him a can of Coke.

Meanwhile, Texas had begun to unload the jeep. Alex saw that the SAS men had brought sausages, burgers, steaks, and chops...enough meat to feed a small army. But apart from a greasy, blackened steel grill, there was no sign of the promised barbecue. Scooter must have read his mind. "We're going to build a bonfire, Alex," he said. "You can help collect wood."

Sparks had taken the guitar out of the back. He rested it on his knee and strummed a few chords. The music sounded tiny, lost in the emptiness of the night.

"Okay. Here's the plan," Scooter said. It seemed that he was the natural leader even if all four men were the same age and rank. "Alex and I will fetch firewood. Texas can start setting things up. Sparks—you keep playing." He took out a flashlight and threw it to Alex. "If you get lost, just listen for the music," he said. "It'll guide you back to the beach."

"Right." Alex wasn't sure he would be able to hear the guitar once he was in the woods, but Scooter seemed to know what he was doing.

"Let's go," Scooter said.

He also had a flashlight and flicked it on. The beam was powerful. Even with the moonlight, it leapt ahead, cutting a path through the shadows. Alex did the same. The two of them moved away from the jeep, heading back up the track that had brought them here. The evening was warmer than Alex had expected. The breeze couldn't penetrate the trees. Everything was very still.

"You all right?" Scooter asked.

Alex nodded.

“We’ll build a fire, get things cooking...then we can have a swim.”

“Right.”

They were still walking. It seemed to Alex that they had left the beach a long way behind them. He could still hear the music—but it was so distant that the notes seemed to have broken up and he couldn’t make out any tune.

“See if you can find any dead wood. It burns better.”

Alex trained his flashlight on the forest floor. There were broken branches everywhere, and he wondered why they had come so far to collect them. But there was no point arguing. He reached down and gathered a few pieces, then a few more. It didn’t take him long to build up a pile...any more and it would be too heavy to carry. Clutching the wood to his chest, he straightened up and looked around for Scooter.

That was when he realized that he was on his own.

“Scooter?” He called out the name. There was no reply. Nor was there any sign of the SAS man’s flashlight. Alex wasn’t worried. It was likely that Scooter had already collected his first bundle and was making his way back to the beach. Alex listened for the sound of the guitar. But it had stopped.

Now he felt the first prickle of doubt. He had been so busy collecting the branches, he had lost his sense of direction. He was in the middle of the woods, surrounded on all sides. Which way was the beach?

Ahead of him, he saw a blink of white. A flashlight. Scooter was there after all. Alex called out his name a second time, but there was no reply. It didn’t matter. He had definitely seen the light and, as if to reassure him, it flashed again. He headed toward it anxiously.

It was only when he had taken twenty or thirty paces that he realized that he was nowhere near the beach, that he had in fact been drawn even farther into the woods. It was almost as if it had been done on purpose. He was the moth, and they had shown him the candle. But just then the light vanished. Even the moon was invisible. Annoyed with himself, Alex dropped the wood. He could always pick more up later. All he wanted to do right now was to find his way back.

Ten more steps and abruptly the trees fell away. But he wasn’t at the beach. Alex’s flashlight showed him a wide, barren clearing with little hillocks of sand and grass. The wood circled all around him. There was no sign at all of Scooter or the second, flickering flashlight that had brought him here.

Now what? Was Scooter playing a prank on him?

Alex decided to go back the way he had come. He might be able to pick up his own footprints. The pile of wood that he had dropped couldn’t be too far away. He was about to turn when something—some animal instinct—made him hesitate. About two seconds later, the whole world stopped.

He knew it was going to happen before it actually did. Alex had been in danger so many times that he had developed a sense, a sort of telepathy, that forewarned him. Animals have it—the awareness that makes their hackles rise and sends them running before there is any obvious reason. Alex was already throwing himself to the ground even before the missile fell out of the sky, smashing the trees into matchsticks, scooping up a ton of earth and throwing it into the sky, shattering the silence of the

night and turning darkness into brilliant, blinding day.

The explosion was enormous. Alex had never felt anything like it. The very air had been turned into a giant fist, a boxing glove that pounded into him—hot and violent—and for a moment he thought he must have broken a dozen bones. He couldn't hear. He couldn't see. The inside of his head was boiling. Perhaps he was unconscious for a few seconds, but the next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground with his face pressed into a clump of wild grass and sand in his hair and eyes. His shirt was torn and there was a throbbing in his ears, but otherwise he seemed to be unhurt. How close had the missile fallen? Where had it come from? Even as Alex asked himself these two questions, a third, more unpleasant one entered his mind. Were there going to be any more?

There was no time to work out what was going on. Alex spat out sand and dragged himself to his knees. At the same time, something burst out in the sky: a white flame that hung there, suspended high above the trees. Alex had tensed himself, expecting another blast, but he quickly recognized it for what it was: a battle flare light, a lump of burning phosphorus, designed to illuminate the area for miles around. He was still kneeling. Almost too late, he realized that he had turned himself into a target, a black cutout against the brilliant, artificial glare. He threw himself forward onto his stomach one second before a cascade of machine-gun bullets came fanning out of nowhere, pulverizing branches and ripping up the leaves. There was a second explosion, smaller than the first, this one starting at ground level and sending a column of flame shooting up. Alex covered his head with his hands. Earth and sand splattered all around him.

He was in a war zone. It was beyond anything he had ever experienced. But common sense told him that no war had broken out in Western Australia. This was a training exercise and somehow—insanely—he had stumbled into the heart of it.

He heard the blast of a whistle and two more explosions followed. The ground underneath him trembled, and suddenly he found that he could no longer breathe. The air around him had been sucked away by the force of the blasts. More machine-gun fire. The entire area was being strafed. Alex glanced up, but even with the battle flares he knew there was no chance he would see anyone. Whoever was firing could be half a mile away. And if he stood up and tried to make himself seen, he would be cut in half before anyone realized their mistake.

And what about Scooter? What about X-Ray and the others? Had they brought him here on purpose? Alex couldn't believe that. What motive could they have to want him dead? Briefly, he remembered what X-Ray had said in the jeep. "*We've come too far. We should have turned off a mile back.*" And when they'd picked him up at the base, Scooter had said there was a big training exercise on that night. That was why they'd been free for a picnic on the beach. Some picnic! As impossible as it seemed, the four SAS men must have driven to the very edge of the war zone. Alex had managed to wander away from the beach when he was collecting wood and had chosen the worst-possible direction. This was the result—a mixture of bad luck and stupidity. But the two of them were going to get him blown apart.

A rhythmic pounding had begun, perhaps a mile away, a mortar bombarding a target that had to be somewhere close by. As each shell detonated, Alex felt a stabbing pain behind the eyes. The power of the weapons was immense. If this was just a training exercise, he wondered what it must be like to get caught up in a real war.

It was time to go. With the mortars still firing, Alex scrambled to his feet and began to move, not

sure which way he should go, knowing only that he couldn't remain here. There was the scream of something falling through and a great *whumph* as it struck the ground somewhere over to Alex's left. That told him all he needed to know. He headed off to the right.

A crackle of machine-gun fire. Alex thought he heard someone shout, but when he looked around, there was no one there. That was the most unnerving thing, to be in the middle of a battle with not a single one of the combatants actually visible. A tree had caught fire. The entire trunk was wrapped in flames, and there were black-and-crimson shadows leaping all over the ground ahead. Just beyond, Alex caught sight of a wire fence. It wasn't much to aim for, but at least it was man-made. Maybe it defined the perimeter of the war zone and he would be safer on the other side. Alex broke into a run. He could taste blood in his mouth and realized he must have bitten his tongue when the first bomb went off. He felt bruised all over. Vaguely, he wondered if he might be hurt more than he actually knew.

He reached the fence—it was made of barbed wire and carried another sign: DANGER, KEEP OUT. Alex almost smiled. What danger could there possibly be on the other side that was worse than this? As if to answer the question, there were three more explosions no more than a hundred yards behind him. Something hot struck Alex on the back of the neck. Without hesitating, he rolled under the fence, then got up and continued running across the ground on the other side.

He was in a field. There was still no sign of the ocean. He was surrounded by trees on all four sides. He slowed down and tried to take his bearings. His neck hurt. He had been burned by the little fragment of whatever it was that had hit him. He wondered if Scooter and the others were looking for him. He would certainly have a few things to say to them...if he ever got out of here alive.

He continued forward. His foot came down on something small and metallic. He heard—and felt—it click underneath his sole. He stopped. And at the same time, a voice came out of the darkness just behind him.

“Don't move. Don't even move a step...”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure roll underneath the fence. At first he thought it must be Scooter—but he hadn't recognized the voice, and a few seconds later he saw that it was an older man with black, curly hair and the beginnings of a rough beard, dressed in full military gear and carrying an assault rifle. The bombs and the shelling seemed to have faded into the distance. They must have been redirected at a target farther away.

The man loomed up next to him, looking at him with unbelieving eyes. “Who the hell are you?” he asked. “How did you get here?”

“What am I standing on?” Alex demanded. Part of him knew the answer. He hadn't dared look down.

“The field is mined,” the man replied briefly. He knelt down. Alex felt the man's hand press gently against his sneaker. Then the man straightened up. His eyes were dark brown and bleak. “You're standing on a mine,” he said.

Alex was almost tempted to laugh. A sense of disbelief shivered through him and he swayed a little, as if he were about to faint.

“Stay exactly as you are!” the man shouted. “Stand up straight. Don't move from side to side. If you

release the pressure, you're going to kill both of us.”

“Who are you?” Alex exclaimed. “What’s going on here? Why is there a mine?”

“Didn’t you see the sign?”

“It just said danger—keep out.”

“What more did you need?” The man shook his head. “You shouldn’t be anywhere near here. How did you get here? What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“I was brought here.” Alex could feel a cold numbness creeping through his leg. It got worse, the more he thought about what lay beneath his foot. “Can you help me?” he asked.

“Stay still.” The man knelt down a second time. He had produced a flashlight. He shone it on the ground. It seemed to take an age, but then he spoke again. “It’s a butterfly,” he said, and there was no emotion in his voice at all. “They call it that because of its shape. It’s a Soviet PFM-1, pressure-sensitive blast mine. You’re standing on enough high explosive to take your leg off.”

“What’s it doing here?” Alex cried. He had to fight the instinct to lift his foot off the deadly thing. His entire body was screaming at him to run away.

“They train us!” the man rasped. “They use these things in Iraq and Indonesia. We have to know how to deal with them. How else are they going to do it?”

“But in the middle of a field...?”

“You shouldn’t be here! Who brought you here?” The man straightened up. He was standing very close to Alex, the brown eyes boring into him. “I can’t neutralize it,” he muttered. “Even if I had the training, I couldn’t risk it in the dark.”

“So what do we do now?”

“I’m going to have to get help.”

“Do you have a radio?”

“If I had a radio, I’d have already used it.” The man laid a hand briefly on Alex’s shoulder. “There’s something else you need to know,” he said. He was speaking softly. His mouth was next to Alex’s ear. “These things have a delay mechanism...a separate fuse that you’ll have activated when you stepped on it.”

“You mean—it’s going to blow up anyway?”

“In fifteen minutes.”

“How long will it take you to find someone?”

“I’ll move as quickly as I can. If you hear a click—you’ll feel it under your foot—throw yourself flat onto the ground. It’s your only hope. Good luck...”

“Wait...,” Alex began.

But the man had already gone. Alex hadn’t even asked him his name.

Alex stood there. He had lost any sense of feeling in his leg, but his shoulder was burning and he was beginning to shiver violently as the shock set in. He forced himself to bring his body back under

control, afraid that the slightest movement could bring a hideous end to this ordeal. He could imagine the sudden flash, the pain, his leg separated from his body. And the worst of it was that there was nothing he could do. His foot was glued to the device that was ticking away, even now, beneath him. He looked around. Although he hadn't noticed it before, the mine had been placed on the top of a ridge, the ground sloping away steeply to a ditch at the bottom. Alex tried to work out the distances. If he threw himself sideways, could he reach the ditch before the mine exploded? And if the force of the blast was above him, would he escape the worst of it?

The bombing had stopped. Suddenly everything was very still. Once again Alex experienced the sense of being completely alone, standing like a scarecrow in the middle of an empty field. He wanted to call out but was afraid to, in case he accidentally shifted his body weight. How long had it been since the man had left? Five minutes? Ten? And how accurate was the timer anyway? The mine could go off at any time.

So did he wait? Or did he take his life into his own hands? Alex made his decision.

He took a deep breath, tensing his body, trying to think of the muscles in his legs as coiled springs that could launch him to safety. His right foot was resting on the mine. The left foot was on flat ground. That was the one that would have to do most of the work. *Do it!* Alex had to force himself, knowing that he might be making the worst mistake of his life, that seconds from now he could be crippled, in agony.

He jumped.

At the very last moment he changed his mind but continued anyway, launching himself down the slope with all his strength. He thought he felt the mine shudder very slightly as his foot left it. But it hadn't exploded, at least not in the half second that he had left the ground. Automatically, he crossed his arms in front of his face, to protect himself from the fall—or from the blast. The slope was rushing past him, a dark streak at the corner of his vision. Then he hit the ditch. Water, cold and muddy, splattered into his face. His shoulder hit something hard. Behind him, there was an explosion. The mine. Clumps of earth and torn grass rained down on him. Then nothing. His face was underwater. He pulled his head back, spitting mud. A plume of smoke rose into the night sky. The fuse must have given him three seconds before it detonated the mine. He had taken those three seconds and they had saved him.

He got unsteadily to his feet. Water was dripping out of his hair and down his face. His heart was pounding. He felt drained, exhausted. Briefly he lost his balance, put a hand out to steady himself, and winced as he caught it on the barbed wire fence. But at least he had found his way out of here. He rolled back underneath and tried to work out which way to go. Seconds later, the question was answered for him. He heard the sound of an engine, saw two beams of light cutting through the trees. His name was being called out. He hurried forward and found a track.

The four SAS men were in the jeep. This time X-Ray was driving. They were rolling slowly through the wood, searching for him. Alex saw that they had left the coolers behind. But Sparks had remembered his guitar.

“Alex!” X-Ray slammed on the brakes and at the same time Scooter leapt out of the passenger seat. He looked genuinely concerned, his face white in the glare of the headlights. “Are you okay? Jesus! We completely screwed up. We've got to get out of here. We shouldn't be anywhere near.”

“I told you...,” X-Ray began.

“Not now!” Scooter snapped. He grabbed hold of Alex. “As soon as the bombs went off, I knew what had happened. I looked for you, but we must have got separated. You look terrible, mate. Are you hurt?”

“No.” Alex didn’t trust himself to say any more.

“Get in. We’ll get you home. I don’t know what to say to you. We’re complete idiots. We could have gotten you killed.”

This time Alex took the front seat. Scooter climbed in the back with the others, and they set off back down the track and out toward the main road. Alex still wasn’t sure what had just happened—how the SAS men had managed to get themselves into this mess. Nor did he care. He allowed the noise of the engine and the cool night air to drift away, and seconds later he was sound asleep.

ON THE ROCKS

TWO DAYS LATER, ALEX had put his experiences at Swanbourne behind him. He was sitting outside a café in Sydney, the opera house on one side, the great stretch of the Harbour Bridge on the other. It was the world's favorite postcard view, and he had seen it many times. But now he was actually in it, eating vanilla-and-strawberry ice cream and watching as the Manly ferry came grinding into the dock, scattering the smaller craft all around it. The sun was beating down and the sky was a dazzling blue. It was hard to believe that he was really here.

And he wasn't alone. Jack had joined him the day before, bleary-eyed with jet lag but awake and bursting with excitement the moment she saw him. It had taken her twenty-six hours to get here, and Alex knew she would have been worrying all the way. Jack was meant to look after him. She hated it when he was away—and this time he had never been farther. From the very start she had made it clear that all she wanted was to get him onto a plane and take him back to London. Yes, it was cold and drizzling there. The English winter had already arrived. Yes, they both deserved a vacation. But it was time to go home.

Jack was also eating ice cream, and although she was twenty-eight, she suddenly looked younger with her untidy red hair, her lopsided smile, and her brightly colored kangaroo T-shirt. More a big sister than a housekeeper. And above all a friend.

"I don't know why it's taking so long," she was saying. "It's ridiculous. By the time you get back, you'll have missed half the semester."

"They said they'd have it this afternoon."

"They should have had it two days ago."

They were talking about Alex's visa. That morning, Jack had taken a call at the hotel where they were both staying. They had been given an address, a government office in Macquarie Street, just past the old parliament building. The visa would be ready at four o'clock. Alex could pick it up then.

"Could we stay here a couple more days?" Alex asked.

Jack looked at him curiously. "Don't you want to go home?" she asked.

"Yes." Alex paused. "I suppose so. But at the same time...I'm not quite sure I'm ready to go back to school. I've been thinking about it. I'm sort of worried I'm not going to be able to fit in."

"Of course you'll fit in, Alex. You've got lots of friends. They've all been missing you. Once you're back, you'll forget any of this stuff ever happened."

But Alex wasn't so sure. He and Jack had talked about it the evening before. After all he had been through, how could he go back to geography lessons and school lunches and being told off for running too fast down the corridor? The day MI6 had recruited him, they had built a wall between him and his past life, and he wondered if there was now any way back.

"I've hardly been to school this year," he muttered. "I'm way behind."

“Maybe we can get Mr. Grey to come over this Christmas break,” Jack suggested. Mr. Grey was the teacher who had given Alex extra tutoring during the summer. “You got along well with him, and he’d soon help you catch up.”

“I don’t know, Jack...” Alex looked at the ice cream, melting on his spoon. He wished he could explain how he felt. He didn’t want to work for MI6 again. He was sure of that. But at the same time...

“It’s three thirty,” Jack said. “We ought to be on our way.”

They got up and made their way along the side of the opera house and up into the botanical gardens—the incredible park that seemed to contain the city rather than the other way around. Looking back at the harbor, the bustle of life below, and the gleaming skyscrapers stretched out behind, Alex wondered how the Australians had managed to get it all so right. It was impossible not to love Sydney, and despite what Jack had said, he knew he wasn’t ready to leave.

Together, the two of them made their way up past the gallery of New South Wales and into Macquarie Street, where the parliament building stood, two stories high, an elegant construction of pink and white that somehow reminded Alex of the ice cream he had just eaten. The address they had been given was just beyond, a modern glass block that was presumably filled with minor government offices. The receptionist already had visitor passes waiting for them and directed them to the fourth floor and a room at the end of a corridor.

“I don’t know why they couldn’t have just put you on a plane and sent you out of here,” Jack grumbled as they left the elevator. “It seems a lot of fuss about nothing.”

There was a door ahead of them. They walked through without knocking and stopped dead in their tracks. There had obviously been some sort of mistake. Wherever they were, this certainly wasn’t a visa office.

Two men were talking to each other in what looked like a library, with antique furniture and a Persian rug on a highly polished wooden floor—Alex’s immediate impression was that the room didn’t belong to the building it was in. A golden Labrador lay curled up on a cushion in front of a fireplace. One of the men was behind a desk. He was the older of the two, wearing a shirt and jacket and no tie. His eyes were concealed behind designer sunglasses. The other man was standing by the window with his arms folded. He was in his late twenties, thin and fair-haired, dressed in an expensive suit.

“Oh...I’m sorry,” Jack began.

“Not at all, Miss Starbright,” the man behind the desk replied. “Please come in.”

“We’re looking for the visa office,” Jack said.

“Sit down. I take it Alex is with you? The question may seem odd, but I’m blind.”

“I’m here,” Alex said.

“Who are you?” Jack asked. She and Alex had moved farther into the room. The younger man came over and closed the door behind them.

“My name is Ethan Brooke. My colleague here is Marc Damon. Thank you very much for coming in, Miss Starbright. Do you mind if I call you Jack? Please—take a seat.”

There were two leather chairs in front of the desk. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable, Jack sat down. The man called Damon walked across and took a third seat at the side. Next to the fireplace, the dog's tail thumped twice against the wooden floor.

"I know you're in a hurry to get back to London," Brooke began. "But let me explain why the two of you are here. The fact of the matter is, we need a little help."

"You want our help?" Jack looked around her. Suddenly it all made sense. "You want Alex." She spoke the words heavily. She knew now who the men were, or at least what they represented. She had met their type before.

"We'd like to make Alex a proposition," Brooke agreed.

"Forget it. He's not interested."

"Won't you at least listen to what we have to say?" Brooke spread his hands. He looked completely reasonable. He could have been a bank manager advising them on their mortgage or a family lawyer about to read a will.

"We want the visa."

"You'll have it. As soon as I'm done."

Alex had said nothing. Jack looked at him, then turned to Brooke and Damon with anger in her eyes. "Why can't you people leave him alone?" she demanded.

"Because he's special. In fact, I'd say he's unique. And right now we need him, just for a week or two. But I promise you, Jack. If he's not interested, he can walk out of here. We can have him on a plane tonight. Just give me a minute to explain."

"Who are you?" Alex asked.

Brooke glanced at Damon. "We work for ASIS," the younger man replied. "The Australian Secret Intelligence Service."

"Special Operations?"

"Covert Action. The two are more or less the same. You could say that we're the rough equivalent of the outfit that Alan Blunt runs in London."

"I've read your file, Alex," Brooke added. "I have to say, I'm impressed."

"What do you want me for?" Alex demanded.

"I'll tell you."

Brooke folded his hands, and to Alex it seemed somehow inevitable, unsurprising, even. It had happened to him six times before. Why not again?

"Have you ever heard the term *snakehead*?" Brooke began. There was silence, so he went on. "All right, let me start by saying that the snakehead groups are without doubt the biggest and most dangerous criminal organizations in the world. Compared to them, the mafia and the triads are amateurs. They have more influence—and they're doing more damage—even than Al Qaeda, but they're not interested in religion. They have no beliefs. All they want is money. That's the bottom line. They're gangsters, but on a huge scale."

“Have you ever bought an illegal DVD? The chances are that it was manufactured and distributed by a snakehead. And the profits they’ll have made out of it will have gone straight into one of their other concerns, which you may not find so amusing. Maybe it’s drugs or slaves or body parts. You need a new kidney or a heart? The snakeheads operate the biggest market in illegal organs, and they’re not fussy about where they get them or even if the donors are deceased. And then there are weapons. In this century alone, there have been at least fifty wars around the world that have used weapons supplied by the snakeheads...shoulder-launched missiles, AK-47s, that sort of thing. Where do you think the terrorists go if they want a bomb or a gun or something nasty and biological that comes in a test tube? Think of it as an international supermarket, Alex. But everything it sells is bad.

“What else can you buy? You name it! Paintings stolen from museums. Diamonds mined illegally using slave labor. Ancient artifacts plundered from Iraq. Elephant’s tusks or tiger skin rugs. A few years ago a hundred kids died on the island of Haiti because someone had sold them cough medicine that happened to contain antifreeze. That was a snakehead—and I don’t think they offered anyone their money back.

“But the biggest moneymaker for the snakeheads is people smuggling. You probably have no idea how many people there are being smuggled from one country to another all around the world. These are some of the poorest families in the world, desperate to build themselves a new life in the West. Some of them are fleeing hopelessness and starvation. Others are threatened in their own countries with prison and torture.” Brooke paused and looked directly at Alex, fixing him with his sightless eyes. “Half of them are under the age of eighteen,” he said. “About five percent of them are younger than you—and they’re traveling on their own. The lucky ones get picked up by the authorities. What happens to the rest of them...you don’t want to know.

“Illegal immigration is a huge problem for Australia, and the people smugglers just make it worse. The immigrants want to break in, and the smugglers sell them tickets. Many of them start in Iraq and Afghanistan. They come in boats from Bali, Flores, Lombok, and Jakarta. What’s sad is that my country used to welcome immigrants. We were all of us once immigrants ourselves. All of that’s changed now—and I have to say, the way we treat these people leaves a lot to be desired. But what can we do? The answer is, we have to stop them from coming. And one of the main ways to do that is to take on the snakeheads face-to-face.

“There’s one snakehead in particular. It operates throughout Indonesia, and it’s more powerful and more dangerous than any of them. As it happens, we know the name of the man in charge. A certain Major Yu. But that’s all we’ve managed to find out. We don’t know what he looks like or where he lives. Twice now, we’ve tried to infiltrate the organization. We put agents inside, pretending to be customers.”

“What happened to them?” Jack asked.

“They both died.” It was Damon who had answered the question.

“And so now I suppose you’re thinking about sending Alex.”

“We have no idea how our agents were uncovered,” Brooke went on. It was as if Jack hadn’t spoken. “Somehow this man—Yu—seems to know everything we’re doing. Either that, or he’s very careful. The trouble is, these gangs operate under a system known as *guanxi*. Basically, it means that everyone knows everyone. They’re like a family. And the fact is, a single agent, coming in from

outside and operating on his own, is too obvious. We need to get inside the snakehead in a way that is completely original and also above suspicion.”

“A man and a boy,” Damon said.

“We have an agent in Bangkok now. We’ve set him up as a refugee from Afghanistan planning to be smuggled into Australia. He’ll meet with the snakehead and gather names, faces, phone numbers, addresses...anything he can. But he won’t be on his own. He’ll be traveling with his son.”

“We’ll fly you to Bangkok,” Damon continued, speaking directly to Alex. “You’ll join our agent there, and the two of you will be passed down the pipeline back here. And here’s the deal. As soon as you’re back on Australian soil, we’ll send you first class direct to England. You won’t have to do anything, Alex. But you’ll provide perfect cover for our man. He’ll get the information we need, and maybe we’ll be able to break up Yu’s network once and for all.”

“Why Bangkok?” There were a hundred questions Alex could have asked. This was the first one that came to his mind.

“Bangkok is a major center for the sale of false documents,” Damon replied. “In fact, we’d very much like to know who supplies Yu’s people with fake passports, export certificates, and the rest of it. And now we have a chance. Our agent was told to wait there until he was contacted. He’ll be given the papers he needs, and then he’ll continue the journey south.”

There was a brief silence.

Then Jack Starbright shook her head. “All right,” she said. “We’ve listened to your proposition, Mr. Brooke. Now you can listen to my answer. It’s NO! Forget it! You said it yourself. These people are dangerous. Two of your spies have already been killed. There’s no way I’m going to allow Alex into that.”

Alex glanced briefly at Jack. She hadn’t given him a chance to speak, and he understood why. She had been afraid of what he might say.

Brooke seemed to have picked up on that too. “I’d have thought after all Alex has been through, he could have made up his own mind,” he said.

“He can make up his own mind. And I’m telling you what he’s going to say. The answer’s no!”

“There is one thing we haven’t mentioned.” Brooke rested his hands on his desk. His face gave nothing away, but Damon knew what was about to come. His boss was the poker player, preparing to show his hand. “I didn’t tell you the name of our agent in Bangkok.”

“And who is that?” Jack asked.

“You know him, I think. His name is Ash.”

Jack sat back, unable to keep the shock out of her eyes. “Ash?” she faltered.

“That’s right.”

Alex had seen the effect the name had had on her. “Who’s Ash?” he demanded.

“You don’t know him?” Brooke was enjoying himself now, though of all the people in the room, only Damon could see it. He turned to Jack. “Maybe you’d like to explain.”

“Ash was someone who knew your dad,” Jack muttered.

“He was rather more than that,” Brooke corrected her. “Ash was John Rider’s closest friend. He was the best man at your parents’ wedding. He’s also your godfather, Alex.”

“My...?” Alex couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. He hadn’t even known he had a godfather.

“For what it’s worth, he was also the last person to see your parents alive,” Brooke went on. “He was actually with them the morning they died. He was at the airport when they got on the plane for the south of France.”

The plane had never arrived. There had been a bomb on board, placed there as an act of revenge by the criminal organization known as Scorpia. That much Alex knew.

“Did you meet him?” Alex gazed at Jack. He was feeling completely disoriented, as if the ground had just been stolen from under his feet. She looked exactly the same.

“I met him a few times,” Jack replied. “It was just after I started working for your uncle. He used to come around and visit. You were the one he wanted to see. I knew he was your godfather.”

“How come you’ve never mentioned him to me?”

“He disappeared. You must have been about four years old. He told me he was emigrating, and I never saw him again.”

“Ash was an agent with MI6,” Brooke explained. “That was how he and your father met. They worked together as a team. Your dad even saved his life once—in Malta. You can ask him about that...if you meet. I think the two of you would have a lot to talk about.”

“How can you do this?” Jack whispered. She was looking at Brooke with utter contempt.

“Ash left MI6 and emigrated here,” Brooke continued. “He came with great references, so we were happy to take him on at ASIS. He’s been with us ever since. Right now he’s in Bangkok, undercover—like I said. But there’s nobody better placed to pretend to be your father, Alex. I mean, he’s almost that already. He’ll look after you. And I think you’ll find him interesting. What do you say?”

Alex said nothing. He had already made up his mind, but somehow he knew that Brooke wouldn’t need to be told. He had figured that out for himself.

“I need time,” he said at length.

“Sure. Why don’t you and Jack go and talk about it?” Brooke nodded, and Damon produced a white card. He must have had it ready in his pocket from the very start. “Here’s a number where you can reach me. We’ll need to fly you into Bangkok tomorrow. So maybe you could call me sometime tonight?”

“I know what you’re thinking, but you can’t possibly go,” Jack said. “It’s wrong.”

Alex and Jack had wandered over to The Rocks, the little cluster of shops and cafés that nestled on the very edge of the harbor, right underneath the bridge. Jack had brought them here on purpose. She wanted to mingle with the crowds somewhere bright and ordinary, a world apart from the hidden truths and half-lies of the Australian secret service.

“I think I have to,” Alex replied.

And it was true. Only an hour ago, he had been promising himself that he would never work for MI6 again. But this was different—and not just because it was the Australians that were asking him this time. It was Ash. Ash made all the difference, even though the two of them had never met and it was a name he had only just heard for the first time.

“Ash can tell me who I am,” he said.

“Don’t you know who you are?” Jack asked.

“Not really, Jack. I thought I knew. When Ian was alive, everything seemed so simple. But then when I found out the truth about him, it all went wrong. All my life he was training me to be something I never wanted. But maybe he was right. Maybe it was what I was always meant to be.”

“You think Ash can tell you?”

“I don’t know.” Alex squinted at Jack. The sunlight was streaming over her shoulders. “When did you meet him?” he asked.

“It was about a month after I started working for your uncle,” she said. “At the time, it was just meant to be a vacation job, to support myself while I was doing my studies. I didn’t know anything about spies, and I certainly didn’t know I’d be sticking with you forever!” She sighed. “You were about seven years old. Do you really not remember him?”

Alex shook his head.

“He was in London for a few weeks, staying in a hotel. But he came over to the house two or three times. Now I come to think of it, he never did talk to you very much. Maybe he felt awkward with kids. But I got to know him a bit.”

“What was he like?”

Jack thought back. “I liked him,” she admitted. “In fact, if you want the truth, I even went out with him a couple of times although he was quite a lot older than me. He was very good-looking. And there was something dangerous about him. He told me he was a deep-sea diver. He was fun to have around.”

“Is Ash his real name?”

“It’s what he calls himself. ASH are his initials—but he never told me what they stood for.”

“And he’s really my godfather?”

Jack nodded. “I’ve seen photos of him at your christening. And Ian knew him. The two of them were friends. I never knew what he was doing in London, but he was eager to check up on you. He wanted to be sure you were okay.”

Alex drew a deep breath. “You don’t know what it’s like, not having parents,” he began. “It never used to bother me because I was so small when they died and I had Uncle Ian. But now I wonder about them. And it sometimes feels like there’s a hole in my life, a sort of emptiness. I look back, but there’s nothing there. Maybe if I spend some time with this man—even if I do have to dress up like an Afghan refugee—maybe it’ll fill something in for me.”

“But Alex...” Jack looked at him, and he could see she was afraid. “You heard what that man said.

This could be terribly dangerous. You've been lucky so far, but your luck can't last forever. These people—the snakehead—they sound horrible. You shouldn't get involved.”

“I have to, Jack. Ash worked with my dad. He was with him the day he died. I didn't know he existed until today, but now I've got to meet him.” Alex forced a smile to his lips. “My dad was a spy. My uncle was a spy. And now it turns out I've got a godfather who's a spy. You have to admit, it certainly runs in the family.”

Jack rested her hands on Alex's shoulders. Behind them, the sun was already setting, reflecting bloodred in the water. The shops were beginning to empty. The bridge hung over them, casting a dark shadow.

“Is there anything I can say to stop you?” she asked.

“Yes.” Alex looked her straight in the eyes. “But please don't.”

“All right.” She nodded. “But I'll be worried sick about you. You know that. Just make sure you look after yourself. And tell Ash from me that I want you home by Christmas. And maybe this time, just for once, he'll remember to send a card.”

Quickly, she turned around and continued walking. Alex waited a minute, then followed. Bangkok. The snakehead. Another mission. The truth was that Alex had always suspected it might happen—but even he hadn't thought it would come so soon.

CITY OF ANGELS?

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, Alex touched down at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok. Even the name warned him that he had arrived at the gateway to a world that would be completely alien to him. For all his travels, he had never been to the East, and yet now, following the thirteen-hour flight from Sydney, he was on his own. Jack had wanted to travel with him but he had decided against it. He'd found it easier to say good-bye to her at the hotel. He knew that he needed time to prepare himself for what might lie ahead.

He had met once more with Brooke and Damon the night before. There hadn't been much more to say. Alex was booked into a room at the Peninsula Hotel in Bangkok. A driver would meet him at the airport and take him there. Ash would meet him as soon as he arrived.

"You realize we'll have to disguise you," Brooke said. "You don't look anything like an Afghan."

"And I don't speak their language," Alex added.

"That's not a problem. You're a child and a refugee. No one will be expecting you to say anything."

The flight had seemed endless. ASIS had booked him in business class, but in a way that made him feel all the more alienated and alone. He watched a movie, ate a meal, and rested. But nobody spoke to him. He was in a strange metal bubble, surrounded by strangers, being carried once again toward danger and possible death. Alex looked out the window at the gray-pink light glowing at the edge of the world and wondered. Was he making a mistake? He could get another plane at Bangkok and be back in London in twelve hours. But he had made his decision. This wasn't about ASIS or the snakehead.

"He was the last person to see your parents alive."

Alex remembered what Brooke had told him. He was about to meet his father's best friend. His godfather. This wasn't just a flight from one country to another. It was a journey into his own past.

The 747 rumbled into its gate. The Fasten Your Seat Belt signs blinked off and the passengers stood up as one, scrabbling for the overhead bins. Alex had one small suitcase and quickly passed through immigration and customs and out into the hot, sticky air of the arrivals area. Suddenly he found himself in a crowd of shouting, gesticulating people.

"Taxi! Taxi!"

"You want hotel?"

It felt strange emerging from business class into this. He was suddenly back in the noise and chaos of the real world. Down to earth in more senses than one.

And then he saw his name, being held on a placard by a Thai man—black-haired, short, casually dressed like almost everyone around him. Alex went over to him.

"Are you Alex? Mr. Ash send me to collect you. I hope you had a good flight. The car is

outside...”

It was as they made their way out of the airport that Alex noticed the man with the poppy in his buttonhole. It was the poppy that first drew his attention. Of course, it was November. Remembrance Sunday, when the whole of England wore poppies and held two minutes’ silence for those killed in wars, would be taking place in England sometime around now. It was just strange to see any sign of it out here.

The man was wearing jeans and a leather jacket. He was European, in his twenties, with dark hair cut short and watchful eyes. He had very square features with high cheekbones and narrow lips. The man had stopped dead in his tracks and seemed to be staring at something on the other side of the arrivals area. It took Alex a moment to realize that the man’s attention was actually fixed on him. Did the two of them know each other from somewhere? He was just asking himself the question when a crowd of people moved between the two of them, making for the exit. When the floor cleared again, the man had gone.

He must have imagined it. Alex was tired after the long flight. Maybe the man had simply been one of the other passengers on the plane. He followed the driver to the parking garage, and a few minutes later they were on the wide, three-lane highway that led into Bangkok—or, as the Thai people called it, *Krung Thep*. City of Angels.

Sitting in the back of the air-conditioned sedan, gazing out the window, Alex wondered quite how it had gotten that name. He certainly wasn’t impressed by his first sight of the city, a sprawl of ugly, old-fashioned skyscrapers, blocks of apartments that were like discarded boxes piled up on top of each other, electricity and satellite towers. They stopped at a toll booth where a woman sat in a cramped cubicle, her face hidden behind the white mask that protected her from the traffic fumes. Then they were off again. Next to the road, Alex saw a huge portrait of a man: black hair, glasses, open-neck shirt. It was painted on the entire side of a building, twenty stories high, covering both the brickwork and the windows.

“That’s our king,” the driver explained.

Alex looked again at the figure. What would it be like, he wondered, to work at a desk inside that office? To pound away at a computer for eight or nine hours a day but to look out at Bangkok through the eyes of a king.

They left the highway, driving down a ramp into a dense, chaotic world of shrubs and food stalls, traffic jams and policemen at every intersection, their whistles screaming like dying birds. Alex saw *tuk-tuks*—motorized rickshaws—bicycles and buses that looked as if they had been welded together from a dozen different models. He felt a hollow feeling in his stomach. What was he letting himself into? How was he going to adapt to a country that was, in every last detail, so different from his own?

Then the car turned a corner. They had entered the driveway of the Peninsula Hotel and Alex learned something else about Bangkok. It was actually two cities: one very poor and one very rich, living side by side and yet with a great gulf between. His journey had brought him from one to the other. Now he was driving through a beautifully tended tropical garden. As they drew up at the front door, half a dozen Thai men in perfect white uniforms hurried forward to help—one to take the luggage, one to help Alex out, two more bowing to welcome him, two holding open the hotel doors.

The cold embrace of the hotel air-conditioning reached out to welcome him. Alex crossed a wide

marble floor toward the reception area with piano music tinkling somewhere in the background. He was handed a garland of flowers by a smiling receptionist. Nobody seemed to have noticed that he was only fourteen. He was a guest. That was all that mattered. His key was already waiting for him. He was shown into an elevator—itsself the size of a small room. The doors slid shut. Only the pressure in his ears told him that they had begun the journey up.

His room was on the nineteenth floor.

Ten minutes later, he stood in front of a floor-to-ceiling window, looking at the view. His suitcase was on his bed. He had been shown the luxury bathroom, the wide-screen TV, the well-stocked fridge, and the complimentary basket of exotic fruit. Alex tried to shrug off the heavy fingers of jet lag. He knew he had little enough time to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

The city was spread out on the other side of a wide brown river that curved and twisted as far as he could see. Skyscrapers stood in the far distance. Nearer by, there were hotels, temples, palaces with perfect lawns, and—standing side by side with them—shacks and slum houses and warehouses so dilapidated they looked as if they might fall over at any time. All manner of boats were making their way up and down the murky water. Some were modern, carrying coal and iron. Some were ferries with strange, curving roofs, like floating pagodas. The nimblest were elongated, long and wafer thin with the driver leaning wearily over the tiller at the very back. The sun was setting. The sky was huge and gray. It was like looking at a television screen with the color turned off.

The telephone rang. Alex went over and picked it up.

“Hello? Is that Alex?” It was a man’s voice. He could make out a slight Australian accent.

“Yes,” Alex replied.

“You arrived okay then?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“I’m in the reception area. You feel like a bit of dinner?”

Alex wasn’t hungry, but that didn’t matter. Even though the man hadn’t introduced himself, he knew who he was talking to. “I’ll come right down,” he said.

He hadn’t had time to shower or change after the flight. It would just have to wait. Alex left the room and took the elevator back down. It stopped twice on the way, letting people in on the ninth and seventh floors. Alex stood silently in the corner. He was suddenly nervous, although he wasn’t quite sure why. Finally, they arrived. The elevator doors opened.

Ash was standing in the reception area, dressed in a blue linen jacket, a white shirt, and jeans. There were plenty of other people around, but Alex recognized him instantly, and somehow he wasn’t even surprised.

They had met before. Ash was the soldier in Swanbourne, the man who had told him he was standing on a grenade.

“It was all a setup, wasn’t it?” Alex said. “The training exercise. The minefield. All of it.”

“Yeah.” Ash nodded. “I expect that must make you pretty annoyed.”

“You could say that,” Alex growled.

There was an eating area just outside the hotel, softly lit, with the river in front of them and a long, narrow swimming pool to one side. The two of them were sitting at a table, facing each other. Ash had a Singha beer. He had ordered Alex a fruit cocktail: orange, pineapple, and guava blended with crushed ice. It was almost dark now, but Alex could still feel the heat of the evening pressing down on him. He realized it was going to take time to get used to the climate in Bangkok. The air was like syrup.

He looked again at his godfather, the man who had played such a major part in his early life. Ash was leaning back with his legs stretched out, untroubled by the trick that had been played at the beach near Swanbourne. Out of uniform, with his shirt open and a silver chain glinting around his neck, he looked nothing at all like a soldier or a spy. He was more like a movie star with his long, black hair, rough beard, and suntanned skin. Physically, he was slim—*wiry* was the word that sprang to Alex’s mind. Fast-moving rather than particularly strong. He had brown eyes that were very dark, and Alex guessed he could easily play the part of an Afghan. He certainly didn’t look European.

There was something else about him that Alex found harder to place. A certain guarded quality in the eyes, a sense of tension. He might look relaxed, but he never would be. He had been touched by something at some time, and it would never let him go.

“So why did you do it?” Alex asked.

“It was a test, Alex. Why do you think?” Ash had a soft, lilting voice. The eight years he had spent in Australia had given him an accent, but Alex could hear the English there too. “ASIS wasn’t going to use a fourteen-year-old boy—not even you. Not unless they were damn sure that you weren’t going to panic at the first sign of danger.”

“I didn’t panic with Drevin. Or with Scorpia...”

“The snakeheads are different. You have no idea what sort of people we’re up against. Didn’t they tell you? They’ve already killed two agents. The first one came back minus his head. They sent the second one back in an envelope. They’d had him cremated to save us the trouble.” Ash drank his beer and signaled to the waiter for another. “I had to see for myself that you were up to the job,” he went on. “We set up a situation that would have terrorized any normal kid. Then we watched how you dealt with it.”

“I could have been killed.” Alex remembered how the first bomb had blown him off his feet.

“You weren’t in any real danger. All the missiles were launched with pinpoint accuracy. We knew exactly where you were all the time.”

“How?”

Ash smiled. “There was a beacon inside the heel of one of your sneakers. Colonel Abbott arranged that while you were asleep. It sent out a signal to the nearest inch.”

“What about the mine?”

“It had less explosive in it than you probably thought. And it was activated by remote control. I set it off a couple of seconds after you made that dive. You did pretty well, by the way.”

“You were watching me all the time.”

“Just put it behind you, Alex. It was a test. You passed. That’s all that matters.”

The waiter arrived with the second beer. Ash lit a cigarette—Alex was surprised to see that he smoked—and blew smoke out into the warm evening air.

“I can’t believe we’re finally meeting,” he said. He examined Alex closely. “You look a hell of a lot like your dad.”

“You were close to him.”

“Yeah. We were close.”

“And my mother.”

“I don’t want to talk about them, Alex.” Ash shifted uncomfortably, then reached out and drank some of his beer. “Do you mind? It was all a long time ago. My life’s moved on since then.”

“It’s the only reason I’m here,” Alex said.

There was a long silence. Then Ash smiled briefly. “How’s that housekeeper of yours?” he asked. “Jack What’s-her-name. Is she still with you?”

“Yes. She said hello.”

“She was an attractive girl. I liked her. I’m glad she stuck by you.”

“You didn’t.”

“Well...I moved on.” Ash paused. Then suddenly he leaned forward. His face was utterly serious and Alex saw that this was a tough, cold-hearted man and that he was going to have to watch himself when they were together.

“All right. This is how we’re going to play it,” he began. “You’re in this smart luxury hotel because I wanted to ease you in. But tomorrow that all comes to an end. We’re going to have breakfast, and then we’re going up to your room and you’re going to become an Afghan boy, a refugee. We’re going to change the way you look, the way you walk, and even the way you smell. And then we’re going out there...” He pointed across the river. “You enjoy your bed tonight, Alex, because where you sleep tomorrow night is going to be very different. And trust me. You’re not going to like it.”

He lifted the cigarette and inhaled. Gray smoke curled out of the corner of his mouth.

“We should make contact with the snakehead in the next forty-eight hours,” he went on. “I’ll explain all that tomorrow. But this is what you’ve got to understand. You do nothing and you say nothing unless I tell you. You play dumb. And if I think the situation is getting out of hand, if I think you’re in danger, you’ll clear out. With no argument. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Alex was taken aback. This wasn’t what he had expected. It wasn’t what he’d flown six thousand miles to hear.

Ash softened. “But I’ll make you this promise. We’re going to be spending a lot of time together, and when I feel I know you better, when the time is right, I’ll tell you everything you want to know. About your father. About what happened in Malta. About your mother and about you. The only thing I’ll never talk to you about is the way they died. I was there and I saw it and I don’t want to remember it. Is that okay with you?”

Alex nodded.

“Right. Then let’s get some food in us. I forgot to mention...the stuff you’re going to eat from now on may not be to your taste either. And you can tell me a bit about yourself. I’d like to know what school you go to and if you have a girlfriend and things like that. Let’s enjoy the evening. There may not be a lot of fun ahead.”

Ash picked up his menu, and Alex did the same. But before he could read it, a movement caught his eye. It was just chance, really. The hotel had a private ferry that ran between the two banks of the river—a wide, spacious boat with antique chairs placed at intervals on a polished wooden floor. It had just arrived, and it was the roar of the engine going into reverse that had made Alex look up.

A man was just climbing aboard. Alex thought he recognized him and his suspicion was confirmed when the man turned around and looked purposefully in his direction. The poppy had gone, but it was the man from the airport. He was sure of it. A coincidence? The man hurried on board, disappearing underneath the canopy as if anxious to get out of sight, and Alex knew that there was no chance about it. The man had spotted him in the arrivals area and followed him here.

Alex wondered if he should mention it to Ash. Almost at once he decided against it. It was impossible for the snakehead to know that he was here, and if he made a fuss, if Ash decided he had been compromised, he might be sent home before the mission had even begun. No. Much better to keep quiet. But if he saw the man a third time, then he would speak out.

So Alex said nothing. He didn’t even watch as the ferry began its crossing back to the other side. Nor did he hear the click of the camera with its special night scope and long-distance lens trained on him as his picture was taken again and again in the dwindling light.

FATHER AND SON

THE NEXT MORNING, ALEX ate the best breakfast of his life. He had a feeling he was going to need it. The hotel offered a hot-and-cold buffet that included just about every cuisine—French, English, Thai, Vietnamese—with dishes ranging from eggs and bacon to stir-fried noodles. Ash joined him but spoke little. He seemed to be deep in thought, and Alex wondered if he wasn't already having reservations about what lay ahead.

“You've had enough?” he asked as Alex finished his second croissant.

Alex nodded.

“Then let's go up to your room. Mrs. Webber will be here soon. We'll wait for her there.”

Alex had no idea who Mrs. Webber was, and it didn't seem that Ash wanted to tell him. The two of them went back up to the nineteenth floor. Ash hung the Do Not Disturb sign on the door and pointed Alex to a seat next to a window. He sat down opposite.

“Okay,” he began. “Let me tell you how this works. Two weeks ago, working with the Pakistani authorities, ASIS managed to pick up a father and a son heading into India on their way here. We interrogated them and discovered they'd paid the snakehead four thousand American dollars to get them into Australia. The father's name is Karim. The son is Abdul. Get used to the names, Alex, because from now on that's you and me. Karim and Abdul Hassan. The two of them were given an address in Bangkok. They were told to wait there until they were contacted by a man called Sukit.”

“Who's he?”

“It took us a while to find out. But it turns out we're talking about a Mr. Anan Sukit. He works for Major Yu. One of his lieutenants, you might say. Very high up. Very dangerous. It means we're one step down the pipeline, Alex. We're on our way.”

“So we wait for him to get in touch.”

“Exactly.”

“What about the real Abdul?” Alex asked. He wondered how he could pretend to be someone he had never even met.

“You don't need to know much about him or his father,” Ash replied. “The two of them are Hazaras—a minority group in Afghanistan. The Hazaras have been persecuted for centuries. They get the worst education and the poorest jobs—in fact, most people think of them as hardly better than animals. *Kofr*—that's the word they use for them. It means ‘infidel,’ and in Afghanistan it's the worst four-letter word you can use about anyone.”

“So where did they get their money?” Alex asked.

“They had a business in the city of Mazar that they managed to sell just before it was taken from them. They hid out in the Hindu Kush until they made contact with a local agent for the snakehead, paid the money, and began their journey south.”

“I don’t suppose I look anything like an Afghan,” Alex said. “What do these Hazara people look like?”

“Most of them are Asiatic...Mongul or Chinese. But not all of them. In fact, a lot of them managed to survive in Afghanistan precisely because they didn’t look too Eastern. Anyway, you don’t need to worry. Mrs. Webber will take care of that.”

“How about language?”

“You won’t talk. Ever. You’re going to pretend to be a simpleton. Just stare into the corner and keep your mouth shut. Try and look scared...as if I’m about to beat you. Maybe I will from time to time. Just to make us look authentic.”

Alex wasn’t sure if Ash was being serious or not.

“I speak Dari,” Ash went on. “That’s the language of the majority in Afghanistan and it’s the language the snakehead will use. I speak a few words of Hazaragi too—but we shouldn’t need them. Just remember. Never open your mouth. If you do, you’ll kill us both.”

Ash stood up. While he had been talking, he had been grim—almost hostile. But now he turned to Alex with something close to desperation in his dark brown eyes. “Alex...” He paused, scratching at his beard. “Are you sure you want to do this? ASIS has got nothing to do with you. People smuggling and all the rest of it...you should be at school. Why don’t you just go home?”

“It’s a little late now,” Alex said. “I agreed. And I want you to tell me about my dad.”

“Is that the main reason you agreed to this?”

“It’s the only reason.”

“I don’t think I could forgive myself if anything happened to you. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for your father. That’s the truth of it.” Ash looked away, as if trying to avoid the memory. “One day I’ll tell you about it...Malta, and what happened after Yassen Gregorovich had finished with me. But I’ll tell you this right now. John wouldn’t thank me for getting you into trouble. In fact, he’d probably chew my head off. So if you’ll take my advice, you’ll call Brooke. Tell him you’ve changed your mind. And get out now.”

“I’m staying,” Alex said. “But thanks anyway.”

In fact, what Ash had just said—the mention of Yassen Gregorovich—had made Alex determined to learn more. Suddenly things were beginning to come together.

Alex knew that his father, John Rider, had pretended to be an enemy agent, working for Scorpia. When MI6 wanted him back, they had arranged for him to be “captured.” That had been in Malta. But it had all been a setup. And Yassen Gregorovich had been there. Yassen was an international assassin, and Alex had met him fourteen years later—first when he was working for Herod Sayle, a second time inside the evil empire of Damian Cray. Yassen was dead now, but it seemed that he was still destined to be part of Alex’s life. Ash had met him in Malta. And whatever had happened on that island was part of the story that Alex wanted to know.

“You’re sure?” Ash asked him one last time.

“I’m sure,” Alex said.

“Very well.” Ash nodded gravely. “Then I’d better teach you this. *Ba’ad az ar tariki, roshani ast.* It’s an old Afghan proverb, and there may come a time when you need to remember it. ‘After every darkness there is light.’ I hope it will be true for you.”

There was a knock at the door.

Ash went over and opened it and a short, rather dumpy woman walked in, carrying a suitcase. She could have been a retired principal or perhaps a very old-fashioned schoolteacher. She was wearing a two-piece olive green suit and heavy stockings that only emphasized the fact that she had very shapeless legs. Her hair hung loose, with no apparent color or style. Her face could have been made of putty. She wore no makeup. There was a single brooch—a silver daisy—pinned to her lapel.

“How are you doing, Ash?” She smiled as she came in and that, along with her broad Australian accent, seemed to bring her to life.

“Good to see you, Cloudy,” Ash replied. He closed the door. “This is Mrs. Webber, Alex,” he explained. “She works for ASIS—a specialist in disguise. Her name is Chlöe, but we call her Cloudy. We think it suits her better. Cloudy Webber—meet Alex Rider.”

The woman stumped over to Alex and examined him. “Hmmm...,” she muttered disapprovingly. “Mr. Brooke must need his head examined if he thinks we’re going to get away with this one. But I’ll see what I can do.” She heaved the suitcase onto the bed. “Let’s have all those clothes off you, boy. Socks, boxers, the lot. The first thing we’re going to start with is your skin.”

“Wait a minute...,” Alex began.

“For heaven’s sake!” the woman exploded. “You think I’m going to see anything I haven’t seen before?” She turned to Ash, who was watching from the other side of the room. “And it’s the same for you, Ash. I don’t know what you’re grinning about. You may look a bit more like an Afghan than him, but I’m going to have all your clothes too.”

She unzipped the suitcase and took out half a dozen plastic bottles filled with various dark liquids. Next came a hairbrush, a vanity bag, and several tubes that might have contained toothpaste. The rest of the bag was packed with clothes that looked—and smelled—as if they had come out of a trash can.

“The clothes are all from the thrift store,” she explained. “Donated in England and picked up in the market in Mazar-i-Sharif. I’ll give you two sets each, which is all you’ll need...you’ll wear them day and night. Ash—go and run a bath.” She unscrewed one of the bottles. The smell—seaweed and mineral spirits—reached Alex even on the other side of the room. “Cold water!” she added sharply.

In the end, she let Alex take a bath on his own. She had mixed two bottles of brown dye with half a bath of cold water. Alex was instructed to lie in it for ten minutes, submerging both his face and his hair. He was shivering by the time he was allowed out and he didn’t dare look in the mirror as he dried himself—but he noticed that the hotel towels now looked as if they’d been dragged through a sewer. He pulled on a pair of ragged, shapeless boxers and came out.

“That’s better,” Mrs. Webber muttered. She noticed the scar just above his heart. It was where Alex had been shot and nearly killed by a sniper following his first encounter with Scorpia. “That might be useful too,” she added. “A lot of Afghan boys have bullet wounds. Together, the two of you make quite a pair.”

Alex didn’t know what she meant. He glanced at Ash—and then he understood. Ash was just

pulling on a shapeless, short-sleeved shirt, and for a moment his chest and stomach were exposed. He too had a scar—but it was much worse than Alex’s, a distinct line of white, dead skin that snaked across his belly and down below the waistline of his trousers. Ash turned away, buttoning up the shirt, but he was too late. Alex had seen the terrible injury. It was a stab wound. He was sure of that. He wondered who had been holding the knife.

“Come and sit down, Alex,” Mrs. Webber said. She had produced a tarp, which she had spread underneath a chair. “Let me deal with your hair.”

Alex did as he was told, and for next few minutes he heard only the click of scissors and watched as uneven clumps of his hair tumbled to the ground. From the way she worked, he doubted that Mrs. Webber had received her training in a London salon. A sheep-shearing farm was more likely. When she had finished cutting, she opened one of the tubes and smeared a thick, greasy ointment over his head. Finally, she stepped back.

“He looks great,” Ash said.

“The teeth still need work. They’d give him away in a minute.”

There was another tube of paste for his teeth. She rubbed it in, using her own finger. Then she produced two small plastic caps. They were both the size of a tooth, but one was gray and one was black.

“I’m going to glue these in,” Mrs. Webber warned him.

Alex opened his mouth and allowed her to fix the fake teeth into place. He grimaced. His mouth no longer felt like his own.

“You’ll notice them for a day or two, but then you’ll forget them,” she said. She stepped back. “There! I’m all done. Why don’t you get dressed and take a look at yourself?”

“Cloudy, you’re damn good,” Ash muttered.

Alex pulled on a faded red T-shirt and a pair of jeans—both of them dirty and full of holes. Then he went back into the bathroom and stood in front of the full-length mirror. He gasped. The boy he was looking at certainly wasn’t him. He was olive-skinned, with hair that was short, dark brown, and matted in thick strands. Somehow the clothes made him look thinner than he really was. He opened his mouth and saw that two of his teeth seemed to have rotted and the rest were ugly and discolored.

Mrs. Webber came in behind him. “You won’t need to worry about the skin color for two weeks,” she said. “Not unless you bathe...and I don’t think you’ll be doing that. You’ll have to check on the hair and teeth every five or six days. I’ll make sure Ash has plenty of supplies.”

“It’s amazing,” Ash muttered. He was standing at the door.

“I’ve got some sneakers for you,” Mrs. Webber added. “You won’t need socks. I doubt a refugee boy would wear socks.”

She went back into the hotel room and produced a pair of sneakers that were stained and torn. Alex slipped them on.

“They’re too small,” he said.

Mrs. Webber frowned. “I can cut a hole for your toes.”

“No. I can’t wear them.”

She scowled at him, but even she could see that the sneakers were far too small. “All right.” She nodded. “You can hang on to your own. Just give me a minute.”

She dug back into the suitcase and produced a razor, some old paint, and another bottle of some sort of chemical. Two minutes later, Alex’s own sneakers looked like they’d been thrown away ten years before. As he slipped them on, she set to work on Ash. He too had completely changed. He didn’t need to dye his skin, and his beard would have suited a Hazara tribesman. But his hair had to be hacked around, and he needed a completely new set of clothes. It was strange, but by the time she had finished, Alex and Ash really could have been father and son. Poverty had brought them closer together.

Mrs. Webber packed again, taking all the clothes that Alex and Ash had been wearing with her. Finally, she zipped her bag shut and straightened up. She jabbed a finger in Ash’s direction.

“You look after Alex,” she commanded. “I’ve already had words with Mr. Brooke. Sending a boy this age into the field, I don’t think it’s right. Just you make sure he comes back in one piece.”

“I’ll look after him,” Ash promised.

“You’d better. Take care, Alex!”

And with that, she was gone.

Ash turned to Alex. “How are you feeling?”

“Grimy.”

“It’s going to get worse. This grime is fake. Just wait till the real dirt gets stuck to you. Are you ready? It’s time we left.”

Alex moved toward the door.

“We’ll take the service elevator,” Ash said. “And we’ll find the back way out. If anyone sees us looking like this in the Peninsula Hotel, we’re going to get arrested.”

The driver who had met Alex at the airport was waiting for them outside the hotel, and he took them over the river and then upstream toward Chinatown. Alex felt the air-conditioning blowing cold against his skin and knew that it was a luxury he wasn’t going to enjoy again for a while. The car dropped them off at a corner, and at once the heat, the grime, and the noise of the city hit him. He was sweating before the door was even closed. Ash dragged a small battered case out of the trunk and that was it. Suddenly they were on their own.

Bangkok’s Chinatown was like nowhere Alex had ever been before. When he looked up, it seemed to have no sky—all the light had been blocked out by billboards, banners, electric cables, and neon signs. Tom Yum Kung Restaurant. Thai Massage. Seng Hong Dental Clinic (Great Smile Start Here). The sidewalks were equally cluttered, every inch of them taken up by stalls spilling food and cheap clothes and electronics into the street. There were people everywhere, hundreds of them, weaving their way between the traffic, which seemed frozen in an endless, diesel-infested jam.

“This way,” Ash muttered, keeping his voice low. From now on, whenever he spoke in English, he

would make sure he wasn't overheard.

They pushed their way into the chaos, and in the next few minutes Alex passed vegetables that he had never seen before and meats he hoped he would never see again: hearts and lungs bubbling in green soup and brown intestines spilling out of their cauldrons as if trying to escape. Every scent on the planet seemed to be mixed together. Meat and fish and garbage and sweat—every step brought another smell.

They walked for about ten minutes until at last they came to an opening between a restaurant—with a few plastic tables and a single glass counter displaying plastic replicas of the food it served—and a paint factory. Here at last was an escape from the main road. A soiled, narrow alleyway led down between the backs of two blocks of apartments—the apartments piled up on one another as if thrown there at random. There was a miniature altar at the entrance, the incense adding another smell to Alex's collection. Farther down, a couple of cars had been parked next to a dozen crates of empty Pepsi bottles, a pile of old gas canisters, a row of tables and chairs. A Chinese woman was sitting cross-legged in the gutter, fixing ribbons to baskets of exotic fruit. Alex remembered the complimentary fruit basket that had been waiting for him in his hotel. Maybe this was where it had come from.

“This is it,” Ash said.

It was the address that Karim Hassan and his son had been given by the snakehead. This was where they were expected to stay.

All the apartments opened directly onto the alley, so that Alex could see straight in. There were no doors or curtains. In one front room, a Chinese man sat smoking at a table, dressed in shorts and glasses, his huge stomach bulging over his knees. In another, a whole family was eating lunch, crouching on the floor with chopsticks. They came to a room that looked derelict—but it was occupied. An old woman was standing beside a stove. Ash signaled to Alex to wait, then went over and spoke to her, relying on sign language as much as words and waving a sheet of paper under her face.

She understood and pointed to a staircase at the back. Ash grunted something in Dari and, pretending to understand, Alex hurried forward.

The stairs were made of cement, with pools of murky water on at least half of them. Alex followed Ash to the third floor and a single door with no handle. Ash pushed it open. On the other side there was a bare room with a metal bed, a spare mattress on the floor, a sink, a toilet, and a grimy window. There was no carpet and no light. As Alex walked in, the biggest cockroach he had ever seen climbed over the side of the bed and scuttled across the wall.

“This is it?” Alex muttered.

“This is it,” Ash said.

Outside, in the alleyway, the man who had followed them all the way from the hotel made a note of the building. Then he took out a cell phone and dialed a number. At the same time, he walked quietly away, and by the time he had been connected, he had disappeared into the crowd.

FIRST CONTACT

“**S**SUPPOSE THEY DON'T come...,” Alex said.

“They’ll come.”

“How much longer do you think we’re going to have to wait?”

They had been living in Chinatown for three days, and Alex was feeling hot, frustrated...and bored. Ash wouldn’t let him have a newspaper or a book in English. There was always the chance that he might be caught reading it by someone entering the room. Nor was he able to see very much of Bangkok. There was no way of knowing when the snakehead might show up, and they couldn’t risk being out.

But Alex had been allowed to spend a couple of hours each morning wandering on his own through the streets. It amused him that nobody treated him like a tourist—indeed, tourists stepped aside to avoid him. Mrs. Webber had done her job well. He looked like a street urchin from somewhere far away, and after more than sixty hours without a shower or a bath, without even changing his clothes, he imagined he could be smelled long before he could be seen.

Slowly he managed to come to grips with the city, the way the shops and the houses, the sidewalks and the streets all tumbled into one another, the clammy heat, the never-ending noise and movement. There seemed to be a surprise around every corner. A cripple with withered legs, scuttling past on his hands like a giant spider. A temple sprouting out of nowhere like an exotic flower. Bald monks in their bright orange robes, moving in a crowd.

He also learned a little more about Ash.

Ash slept badly. He had given Alex the bed and taken the mattress for himself, but sometimes in the night he would begin muttering and then jerk awake. Then he would clasp his hand to his stomach and Alex knew that he was remembering the time he had been stabbed and that it was hurting him even now.

“Why did you become a spy?” Alex asked one morning.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” Ash growled. He hated being asked questions and seldom gave straightforward answers. But that morning he was in a better mood. “I was approached while I was in the army.”

“By Alan Blunt?”

“No. He was there when I joined—but he wasn’t in the top spot. I was recruited the year after your dad. I’ll tell you why he joined, if you like.”

“Why?”

“He was a patriot.” Ash grimaced. “He really thought he had a duty to serve his queen and country.”

“Don’t you?”

“I did...once.”

“So what happened? What made you change your mind?”

“It was a long time ago.” Ash had a way of cutting off a conversation if he didn’t want to say more. Alex had come to learn that when that happened, there was no point in trying to go on. Ash could wrap silence around him like a coat. It was infuriating, but Alex knew he would just have to wait. Ash would talk in his own time.

And then, on the fourth day, the snakehead came.

Alex had just gotten back with food from the local market when he heard the stamp of feet on the concrete steps. Ash threw him a look of warning and swung himself off the bed just as the door crashed open and one of the ugliest men Alex had ever seen walked into the room.

He was short, even for a Thai, wearing a suit that looked as if it had shrunk in the wash to fit him. He was bald and unshaven, so that both the top and bottom of his head were covered in a thin black stubble. On the other hand, he didn’t seem to have any eyebrows—as if his skin were too thick and pockmarked to grow through. His mouth was impossibly wide, like an open wound, with as many gaps as teeth. Worst of all, he had no ears. Alex could see the discolored lumps of flesh that remained. The rest had at some time been cut off.

This had to be Mr. Anan Sukit. There was a second Thai man with him, dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans, carrying a camera—a clunky wooden box that could have come out of an antique shop. A third man followed. He looked similar to Ash—presumably an Afghan brought along to translate.

Alex quickly sat down in the corner. He glanced at the three men but tried not to show too much interest, as if he didn’t want to be noticed himself.

Sukit snapped a few words at the translator, who then spoke to Ash. Ash replied in Dari, and a three-way conversation began. As it continued, Alex noticed Sukit examining him. The snakehead boss had tiny pupils that moved ceaselessly, traveling left and right across his eyes. At the same time, the cameraman had started his work. Alex sat still as several shots were taken of him. Then it was Ash’s turn. He had already explained to Alex what sort of papers would be prepared. Passports, possibly with visas for Indonesia. A police arrest form for Ash. A hospital report showing that he had been injured during questioning. Perhaps an old membership card for the Communist Party. All these things would help him get refugee status once he arrived in Australia.

The photographer finished, but the discussion went on. Alex became aware that something was wrong. Sukit nodded in his direction a couple of times. He seemed to be making some sort of demand. Ash was arguing. He looked unhappy. Alex heard his name—Abdul—mentioned several times.

Then suddenly Anan Sukit walked over to him. He was sweating, and his skin smelled of garlic. Without warning, he reached down and dragged Alex to his feet. Ash stood up and shouted something. Alex couldn’t understand a word that was being said, but he did what Ash had told him and stared with unfocused eyes as if he was a simpleton. Sukit slapped him, twice, on each side of his face. Alex cried out. It wasn’t just the pain. It was the casual violence, the shock of what had just happened. Ash let loose a torrent of words. He seemed to be pleading. Sukit spoke one last time. Ash nodded. Whatever had been demanded, he’d agreed. The three men turned and left the room.

Alex waited until he was sure they had gone. His cheeks were stinging. “I take it that was Anan Sukit?” he muttered.

“That was him.”

“What happened to his ears?”

“A gang fight. It happened five years ago. Maybe I should have mentioned it to you before. Someone cut them off.”

“He’s lucky he doesn’t need glasses.” Alex rubbed the side of his face with a grimy hand. “So what was all that about?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t understand...” Ash was deep in thought. “They’re getting the papers for us. They’ll be ready this evening.”

“That’s good. But why did he hit me?”

“He made a demand. I refused. So he got angry—and he took it out on you. I’m sorry, Alex.” Ash ran a hand through his long dark hair. He looked shaken by what had just taken place. “I didn’t want him to hurt you, but there was nothing I could do.”

“What did he want?”

Ash sighed. “Sukit insisted that you collect the papers. Not me. He just wants you.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say. He just told me they’d pick you up at Patpong at seven o’clock this evening. You’ve got to be there on your own. If you’re not there, we can forget it. The deal’s off.”

Ash fell silent. He had lost control of the situation, and he knew it. Alex wasn’t sure how to respond. His first encounter with the snakehead had been short and unpleasant. The question was—what did they want with him? Had they seen through his disguise? If he turned up at this place—Patpong—they could bundle him into a car and he might never be seen again.

“If they wanted to kill you, they could have done it here and now,” Ash said. It was as if he’d read Alex’s thoughts. “They could have killed both of us.”

“Do you think I should go?”

“I can’t make that decision, Alex. It’s up to you.”

But if he wasn’t there, there would be no forged papers, no way for Ash to find out where they were being manufactured. Nor would the two of them be able to continue down the pipeline. The mission would be over before it had even begun. And Alex would have learned nothing from Ash—about his father, about Malta, about Yassen Gregorovich.

It was a risk. But it was one worth taking.

“I’ll do it,” Alex said.

Patpong showed Alex another side of Bangkok—and not one that he wanted to see. It was a tangle of bars and strip clubs where backpackers and businessmen gathered to drink the night away. Through

the doorways he glimpsed half-naked dancers writhing in time to western pop music. Fat men in floral shirts strolled past with Thai girlfriends. The neon lights flickered and the music pounded out and the air was thick with the smell of alcohol and cheap perfume. It was the last place on earth that a fourteen-year-old English boy would want to find himself, and Alex was feeling distinctly uncomfortable, standing at the entrance to the main square. But he'd only been there a few minutes when a beat-up black Citroën pulled over with two men inside. He recognized one of them. The man in the passenger seat had been carrying the camera and had taken the pictures of him and Ash.

So this was it. He had come to Thailand to investigate the snakehead and now he was delivering himself to them with no weapons, no gadgets—nothing to help him if things went wrong. Were they simply going to hand over the papers as promised? Somehow he doubted it. But it was too late for second thoughts. He climbed into the back of the car. The seat was plastic—and it was torn. A pair of furry dice swung beneath the driver's mirror.

Nobody spoke to him, but then, of course, they didn't know his language. Ash had warned him not to say anything, no matter what happened. One word of English would mean an immediate death sentence for both of them. He would pretend that he was simple, that he understood nothing at all. If things got out of hand, he would try to break away.

The Citroën joined in the sluggish flow of traffic, and suddenly they were surrounded by cars, trucks, buses, and *tuk-tuks*—the three-wheeled taxis that were actually nothing more than motorcycles with a makeshift cabin built on the back. As always, everyone was hooting at everyone. The heat of the evening only intensified the noise and the smell of exhaust fumes that hung thick in the air.

They drove for about thirty minutes. It had grown dark, and Alex had no idea in which direction they were heading. He tried to pick out a few landmarks—a neon sign, a skyscraper with a strange gold dome on the roof, a hotel. Part of his job was to find out as much about the snakehead as he could, and the following day he might have to show Ash exactly where he'd been taken. The car turned off the main road, and suddenly they were traveling down a narrow alleyway between two high walls. Alex was liking this less and less. He had the feeling that he was delivering himself into some sort of trap. Sukit had said he would hand over the papers, but Alex didn't believe him. There had to be another reason for all this.

And then they broke out and he saw the river in front of him, the water black and empty but for a single rice barge making its way home. In the far distance, a tower block that he recognized caught his eye. It was the Peninsula Hotel, where he had spent his first night. It was less than half a mile upstream, but it might as well have belonged to a different world. The car slowed down. They had come right to the river's edge. The driver turned off the engine. They got out.

The smell of sewage. That was what hit him first: thick, sweet, and heavy. The surface of the water was completely covered with a layer of rotting vegetables and garbage that rocked back and forth with the current like a living carpet. One of the men pushed him, hard, in the small of his back, and he made his way over to a broken-down jetty where a boat was waiting to ferry them across, another hard-faced Thai man at the rudder. Alex climbed in. The other men followed.

They set off. The moon had risen, and out in the open, everything was suddenly bright. Ahead of him, Alex could see their destination. There was a long, three-story building with a green-painted sign advertising it to any passing river traffic. Chada Trading Agency & Consultant. Alex didn't like the look of it one bit.

The building was on the very edge of the river, half falling into it, propped up on a series of concrete posts that held it about two yards above the water. It was made of wood and corrugated iron: a slanting, leaning assembly of roofs, verandas, balconies, and walkways that could have been hammered together by a child. It seemed to have no windows and few doors. As they drew closer, Alex heard a sound: a low shouting that suddenly rose up like a crowd at a soccer match. It was coming from inside.

The boat drew in. A ladder led up to a landing platform, and once again Alex felt a fist jabbing into his lower back. It seemed to be the only way these people knew how to communicate. He got unsteadily to his feet and grabbed the ladder. As he did so, he heard something splash in the water and saw a streak of movement out of the corner of his eye. Some sort of creatures were living in the dark space underneath the building. There was another roar from inside and the chime of a bell. How had he gotten himself into this? Alex gritted his teeth and climbed up.

Now he found himself in a narrow corridor that sloped down with doorways facing each other on opposite sides. Naked bulbs hung at intervals, throwing out a damp yellow light. The whole place smelled of the river. Halfway down, they stopped at one of the doors, which was thrown open to reveal a room that was like a cell, a couple of yards square with a tiny barred window, a bench, and a table. There was a pair of bright red shorts lying on the bench. Cameraman—Alex didn't know his name, and that was how he thought of him—picked up the shorts and spat out a sentence in Thai. This time the meaning was clear.

The door slammed shut. There was another roar from somewhere nearby, the sound echoing outward. Alex picked up the shorts. They were made of silk, recently laundered, but there were still dark spots embedded in the material. Old bloodstains. Alex clamped down the rising sense of fear. He looked at the window, but there was no way he was going to be able to climb out. He had no doubt the Thai men were standing guard on the other side of the door. He heard the whine of a mosquito and slapped it against the side of his head. He began to undress.

Ten minutes later, they led him back down the corridor and along to a flight of steps that seemed to have collapsed in on itself like a house of cards. Alex was now wearing the shorts and nothing else. They started high on his body, above the waist, and came down to his knees. They were the sort of thing worn for a boxing or wrestling match. Which of them was it going to be? he wondered. Or was he being led toward something worse than either?

He heard music playing. The crackle of a loudspeaker and a stream of words, amplified, all in Thai. Laughter. The soft babble of many people talking. At last he emerged into a scene that was like nothing he had ever experienced before—and something he would never forget.

It was an arena, circular in shape with dozens of narrow pillars holding up the ceiling, a raised boxing ring in the middle and wooden seating slanting up around the sides. It was lit by neon strips that dangled on chains, and there were twenty or thirty fans turning slowly, trying to redistribute the hot, sticky air. Thai music was blaring out of speakers, and, bizarrely, there were old television sets facing outward, each one showing a different program.

The ring itself was surrounded by a wire fence that had been built either to keep the players in or the audience out. There must have been about four hundred Thais in the room, chattering excitedly among themselves as they swapped bright yellow slips of paper. Alex had read somewhere that betting was illegal in Thailand, but he recognized at once what was going on here. He had arrived just

at the end of a fight. A young man was being dragged feetfirst across the ring, his arms splayed out, his shoulders painting a red streak along the canvas as he was carried away. And the members of the audience who had bet on his opponent were collecting their winnings.

Alex was at the very back of the auditorium. As he arrived, another man—dressed like him in shorts—was led down to the ring, his entire body taut with fear. Seeing him, the audience laughed and applauded. More yellow betting slips changed hands. Someone put a hand on Alex's shoulder and pushed him down onto a plastic seat. There was a crack in the floor, and he caught a glimpse of silver, the river water lapping at the concrete posts underneath. He was sweating, and the mosquitoes had picked up his scent. He could hear them right inside his ear. His skin crawled as he was bitten again and again.

The new challenger had passed through the audience and reached the wire fence. Someone had placed a laurel of flowers around his neck. He looked as if he was about to be sacrificed. It occurred to Alex that in a sense he was. Two burly Thai men led him through a door in the fence and helped him climb into the ring. They forced him to bow to the audience. Then, in the far corner, the champion appeared.

He wasn't big—very few people in this country were—but he emanated power and speed. Alex could see every single muscle on his body. They were locked together like metal plates, and he didn't have a single spare ounce of fat. His hair, very black, was cut short. His eyes were black too. He had a boy's face, completely smooth, but Alex guessed he was in his mid-twenties. His name—Sunthorn—was written in white letters on his shorts. He bowed to the audience and danced on his feet, raising his fists to acknowledge their applause.

The other man awaited his fate. The flower garland had been removed, and the Thai men had left the ring. The music stopped. A bell rang.

At once, Alex understood what he was seeing. He had been expecting the worst, and this was it. *Muay Thai*, also known as the science of eight limbs, one of the most aggressive and dangerous martial arts in the world. Alex had learned karate, but he knew that it was a world apart from *muay Thai*, which permitted strikes by the fists, elbows, knees, and feet with no fewer than twenty-four targets—from the top of the head to the rear calf—on your opponent. And this was a dirty, illegal version. Neither of the fighters had hand wraps, shin pads, or abdomen protectors. The fight would continue until one of them was carried out unconscious...or worse.

Alex watched the first round with a mixture of fascination and horror, knowing that he was going to be next. The fight had begun with both men weaving around each other, weighing up each other's weaknesses. Sunthorn had struck out a few times, first with a right-side elbow attack, then twisting his body around in a fast knee strike. But the challenger was faster than he looked, dodging both blows and even trying a counterkick, slicing his left foot into the air and missing Sunthorn's neck by inches, a move that got a roar of excitement from the crowd.

But then, at the end of the first round, he made his fatal mistake. He had allowed his guard to drop, as if waiting for the bell. Suddenly Sunthorn lashed out, a rear leg push kick that slammed into the other man's chest, winding him and almost throwing him off his feet. It was only the chime of the bell a second later that saved him. He staggered into the corner, where someone forced a bottle of water into his mouth and wiped down his face. But he was barely conscious. The next round wouldn't last long.

In the brief interval, more music blasted out of the speakers. The televisions flickered back on. Yellow slips were exchanged, and Alex noticed people gesticulating wildly, angrily tapping their watches. He was feeling sick. He realized now that the audience wasn't betting on who was going to win the fight. With Sunthorn in the ring, there could be no doubt of that. They were betting on how long a fighter could last against him.

The bell rang for the next round, and as expected, it was all over very quickly. The challenger moved forward as if he knew he was walking to his execution. Sunthorn examined him with a cruel smile, then finished the fight in the most vicious way he could: a kick to the stomach followed by a second, much-harder kick straight into the face. A great flower of blood erupted into the ring. The audience howled. The challenger crashed down on his back and lay still. Sunthorn danced around him, waving his fists in triumph. The seconds climbed into the ring to clear away the mess.

And now it was Alex's turn.

He was suddenly aware of a man leaning over him—a weird, stretched-out face like a reflection in a fairground mirror. It was Anan Sukit. The snakehead lieutenant spoke to him first in Thai, then in another language, perhaps Dari. Once again, Alex smelled the stale scent of garlic. Sukit paused. Alex stared straight ahead, as if he hadn't even heard what had just been said. Sukit leaned forward. He said something in bad French. Then he repeated it in English.

“You fight, or we kill you.”

Alex had to force himself to pretend that he hadn't understood. The man couldn't possibly have known who he was or where he came from. He was simply saying the same thing in as many languages as possible. And finally he used the most effective language of all, grabbing Alex by the hair and pulling him out of his seat and then propelling him down the aisle toward the ring.

As he walked down between the audience, Alex felt himself being examined and evaluated on every side. Once again the yellow markers were being handed out, and he could imagine the bets being placed. Fifteen seconds...twenty seconds...it was obvious that this foreign boy wouldn't last long. His heart was pounding—he could actually see the movement in his naked chest. Why had he been chosen for this? Why not Ash? He could only assume that these people got a sick satisfaction out of a change of pace. During the course of the evening, they had seen a number of men beaten up. Now they were going to watch the same thing happen to a teenager.

He passed through the opening in the fence. The two seconds were waiting for him, grinning and offering to help him up into the ring. One of them was carrying a garland of flowers to put around his neck. Alex had already made up his mind about that. As their hands reached toward him, he struck out at them, drawing laughter and jeers from the crowd. But he wasn't going to be touched by them, nor was he going to parade in their flowers. He pulled himself into the ring just as two cleaners climbed out, lowering themselves between the ropes. They took with them the bloody rags that they had just used to clean the canvas floor.

Sunthorn was waiting in the opposite corner.

It was only now that he was closer that Alex could see the arrogance and the cruelty of the man he was about to face. Sunthorn had probably been training all his life and knew that this next fight was going to be over as soon as it began. But he didn't care. Presumably he was being paid and would cheerfully maim Alex for life, provided he got his check. Already he was smiling, showing cracked

lips and uneven teeth. His nose had been broken at some time, and it had set badly. He might have the body of a world-class athlete, but he had the face of a freak.

A plastic bottle of water was forced between Alex's lips, and he drank. It was horribly warm in the stadium, and that would only sap his strength. He wondered how Sunthorn had managed to continue for so long. Perhaps he was given some sort of drug. The military music was blasting all around him. The fans were turning. Alex clung to the rope, trying to work out some sort of strategy. Would it be easier just to take a dive the moment the fight began? If he allowed himself to be knocked out in the opening seconds, at least it would all be over. But there was a risk in that too. It would all depend on how hard Sunthorn hit him. He didn't want to wake up with a broken neck.

The music stopped. The bell rang. The spectators fell silent. It was too late to work out any plan. The first round had begun.

Alex took a couple of steps forward. He could feel the eyes of the crowd boring into him, waiting for him to go down. In front of him, Sunthorn looked completely relaxed. He had taken up the standard stance, with his body weight poised on his front foot—the basic defense in almost every martial art—but he barely looked interested. It occurred to Alex that if he had any chance at all in this fight, it would be in the opening seconds. Nobody in the arena could possibly know that he was a first-grade *dan*—with a black belt in karate. The fight was completely unfair. Sunthorn had the advantages of size, weight, and experience. But Alex had the advantage of surprise.

He decided to use it. He continued forward and, at the last second, when he knew he was close enough, he suddenly twisted around and lashed out with all his strength. He had used the back kick, one of the most powerful blows in karate, and if he had made contact, he would have taken his opponent out then and there. But to his dismay, his foot hit only empty air. Sunthorn had reacted with fantastic speed, springing back and twisting so that the kick missed his abdomen by an inch. The audience gasped, then chattered with new excitement. Alex tried to follow through with a front jab, but this time Sunthorn was ready. He blocked the attack with his own right arm, then followed through with a counterkick that slammed into Alex's side, propelling him back against the ropes. Alex was bruised and winded. Red spots danced in front of his eyes. If Sunthorn hit him a second time, it would be over. Alex rested with the ropes against his shoulder and waited for the end.

It didn't come. Sunthorn was smiling again, enjoying himself. The foreign boy hadn't been the easy kill that everyone expected, and he knew he could enjoy himself here. The audience wanted blood, but they wanted drama too. He could play with the boy for a while, weaken him before the final blow that would put him into the hospital. He reached out with his hand, bending his fingers as if to say, "Come on!" The crowd roared its approval. Even the gamblers who had already lost and were tearing up their yellow slips wanted to see more.

Alex drew a deep breath and straightened up. There was a red mark where Sunthorn's foot had caught him, just above the waist. The man had a sole that could have been made of the toughest leather and leg muscles like steel rods. How could Ash have got him into this? But Alex knew it wasn't his godfather's fault. He should have listened to Jack when he was in Sydney. Right now he could have been safely back at school.

For the next couple of minutes, the two of them circled each other, throwing a few feints, but neither of them landing a real punch. Alex tried to keep his distance while he recovered his breath. How long did each round last? He had seen that there were intervals, and he desperately needed a

few seconds on his own, unthreatened: time to think. The sweat was dripping off him. He wiped his eyes, and that was when Sunthorn attacked him, a whirl of jabbing elbows, knees, and fists, any one of which could have knocked Alex down.

In the next thirty seconds, Alex used every defense technique he had ever been taught, but he knew that in truth, he was simply relying on his instincts, dodging and weaving as the arena seemed to spin around him, the audience shouting, the fans turning, and the sluggish heat weighing down on him from all sides. A right hook caught him on the side of the face and his whole head jerked around, a spasm of pain traveling down his neck and spine. Sunthorn followed through with a side knee to the ribs. Alex doubled up, unable to help himself. He hit the canvas just as the bell rang for the end of the first round.

There was applause and cheering. The music blared out. Sunthorn leapt back, grinning and waving his hands, enjoying the fight. Alex felt he had no strength left. He was aware of the two men acting as his seconds, shouting at him, gesticulating for him to return to his corner. Somehow he forced himself to his feet. His nose was bleeding. He could taste the blood as it trickled into his mouth.

He wasn't going to last another round: that much was obvious. All the odds were against him. But he had come to a decision. Sunthorn was older, taller, heavier, and more experienced than he was, and there was only one way Alex was going to beat him.

He was just going to have to cheat.

ONCE BITTEN...

ONE OF THE MEN who had been chosen to look after Alex while he was fighting wiped away the blood with a wet sponge. The other helped him drink. Alex felt the cold water trickle down the sides of his face and over his shoulders. Both the men were grinning at him, muttering words of encouragement as if he could understand a single word they were saying. They had probably done exactly the same during the previous fight—and Alex had seen the result. Well, he wasn't going to let that happen to him. These people were in for a surprise.

He felt the water bottle being forced one last time between his lips and sucked in as much as he could. A moment later, a bell rang and the bottle was whisked away. The interval music stopped. There were shouts from different parts of the audience. Glancing to one side, Alex saw Anan Sukit striding forward to take a place in the front row. He probably wanted a closer view of the final knockout.

Alex moved forward cautiously, his fists raised, his weight evenly distributed on the balls of his feet. Sunthorn was waiting for him. That was good. The one thing that Alex had most feared was a fast, direct attack. That wouldn't leave him time for what he had in mind. But Alex had shown his true colors in the first round. Sunthorn knew that he had trained in at least one martial art, and he was planning his moves carefully. Alex had come close to knocking him out. Sunthorn wasn't going to give him a second chance.

In the end, he went for a straight clinch...a wrestling grip that in *muay Thai* is also known as the standard tie-up. Suddenly they were face-to-face, their feet almost touching. Sunthorn had locked his hands behind Alex's head and he was sneering, utterly confident. With his extra height, he had the complete advantage. He could throw Alex off balance or finish him with an explosive strike from his knee. The audience saw that the last seconds of the fight had arrived and roared their approval.

It was exactly what Alex wanted. It was exactly what he had been inviting. Before Sunthorn could make his move, he acted. What nobody knew—not Sunthorn, nor the seconds nor the audience—was that Alex's mouth was still full of water and had been since the round began. Now he spat it out, straight into Sunthorn's face.

Sunthorn reacted instinctively, jerking his head back in surprise and loosening his grip. For a second he was blinded. Alex acted instantly, striking out with a savage uppercut that sent his fist crashing into the man's jaw. But that wasn't enough. He wouldn't get a second chance and had to finish this now. Alex swung around, putting all his strength into a single powerhouse kick, his bare foot landing square in the man's solar plexus.

Even Sunthorn's advanced muscle structure wasn't up to such a blow. Alex heard the breath explode out of his lips. All the color left his face. For a moment, he stood there, his hands hanging limply beneath him. The crowd had fallen silent—as if in shock. Then Sunthorn collapsed onto his knees and finally slammed facedown, unconscious, onto the floor.

The entire arena erupted with cries of anger and outrage. The audience had seen what had

happened—and they couldn't believe it. The foreign boy had been brought here to entertain them, but he had cheated them instead. They had lost money. And their champion—Sunthorn—had been humiliated.

It was only now, hearing the shouting all around him, that Alex realized that he had put himself in fresh danger. If he had played his part as expected, he might have been carried out on his back and with a broken nose...or worse. But presumably there would have been a consolation prize. He would have been driven home with the false documents that Ash had sent him here to collect. There was no longer any of that. He had offended the snakehead, taken out their prize fighter. Somehow he doubted that they were going to thank him and give him a gold cup.

He stepped over the unconscious body and made as if to climb out of the ring. But he saw at once that he was right. Anan Sukit was back on his feet, his face dark with fury, his eyes ablaze. He had pulled a gun out of an inside pocket of his suit. Unbelieving, Alex watched as he brought it around and aimed. Sukit was going to shoot him, right there, in front of all these people...a punishment for the trick that had just been played. And there was nothing Alex could do, nowhere to hide. He watched as the cold eye of the muzzle focused on his chest.

Then all the lights went out.

The darkness was absolute. It seemed to fold in from all sides, like a collapsing box. Sukit had chosen that moment to fire. Alex saw two bursts of orange flame and heard the shots. But he was already moving. The bullets had been aimed at his head, but he had dropped down onto the canvas and was rolling away, searching for the ropes on the other side of the ring. He found them. Reaching up with one hand, he swung himself through, then down into the ringside area below.

The spectators had reacted to the blackout with silence, but the sound of the two shots had provoked instant panic. They were suddenly blind, and someone had a gun! Alex heard screams, the clatter of seats being pushed to the ground. Someone ran into Alex, then tumbled back. There were more cries of protest. Alex crouched where he was, waiting for his eyes to get used to the dark.

At least that happened quickly. As Alex had approached the arena from the river, he had seen how dilapidated it was—and although there were no windows, the roof and the walls were full of cracks. The moon was still shining and the light was spilling in everywhere...not enough to make out faces, but Alex was in no mood to make new friends. All he wanted was the way out and he could see it, straight in front of him, up a flight of concrete steps.

He got to his feet and ran forward—crashing into the wire fence that surrounded the ring. Where was the opening? Desperately he felt his way along, using his palms against the wire. Somehow he found the gap and stumbled through, forcing himself on toward the sloped seating that climbed steeply up to the door where he'd come in. There was a third shot and a man standing next to him twisted around and fell. Sukit had spotted him, which was hardly surprising. Alex's bare shoulders and light-colored shorts would make him a target even in the dark. He scrambled forward, fighting his way through the crowd. His skin was slippery, covered in sweat, and at least that made it difficult for anyone to grab hold of him. A Thai man stepped in front of him, muttering something in his own language. Alex raised a hand, driving the heel straight into the man's face. The man grunted and fell backward. The knife he had been holding clattered to the floor. So now Alex understood the rules. He was to be captured and killed. That seemed to be the price of winning the fight.

Alex was unarmed. He was half naked. And members of the snakehead were all around him. He knew that only speed and the darkness were on his side. He had to find his way out of this building in the next few minutes. And that meant retrieving his own clothes. He reached the door—and it was at that moment that the lights flashed back on.

Sukit saw him at once. He pointed with a single, stubby finger and shouted. Alex saw half a dozen young men running toward him—all of them black-haired, dressed in black shirts. They were coming at him from both sides. Sukit fired. The bullet hit a pillar and ricocheted into one of the television sets. The glass shattered and there was a crackle of electricity. Alex saw a tongue of flame and wondered if the whole place might catch fire. That would help him. But the walls were too damp. The river was everywhere, even in the air he was breathing. He hurled himself through the doorway and down the wooden staircase on the other side, almost losing his balance on the crazy fairground steps. A splinter buried itself in his toe. Alex ignored the pain. He was back in the corridor. Which way had they led him? Left or right? He had less than a second to make a decision and the wrong choice might kill him.

He went right. That way, the corridor sloped upward, and he remembered that coming in, he had gone down. Behind him, he heard a burst of gunfire...not one gun but several. That was strange. He was out of sight now, so who were they firing at? The dull yellow lightbulbs flickered overhead. It seemed that war had broken out in the arena. Was it possible...? Alex wondered if Ash could have somehow followed him here. Certainly there seemed to be someone on his side.

He found the room where he had undressed and ran in, swinging the door shut behind him. His clothes were where he'd left them, and gratefully he pulled them on. At least he looked normal again—and he needed the sneakers if he was going to run over any more wooden floors. When he was dressed, he went back to the door and slowly opened it. Sweat trickled down the side of his face. His hair was drenched. But there didn't seem to be anyone outside.

The end of the corridor and the exit to the jetty were about twenty yards away. But as he made his way toward the open air, Alex heard the roar of an engine, and knew that a boat had just pulled in. He guessed what was going to happen next. Luckily, he was outside one of the other rooms. He threw himself inside just as the main door crashed open and the new arrivals began to make their way down the corridor. There were two of them. They were both carrying old-fashioned, Russian-made RPK-74 light machine guns. The barrels had been modified to make them shorter. As Alex crouched in the shadows, he heard them move toward him. They were searching the changing rooms, one by one. In less than a minute they would be here.

Alex looked around him. This room was almost identical to the one he had left, with no cupboards, nowhere to hide, and a single window, securely barred. But there was one difference. Part of the floor had rotted away. He could just make out the water, churning underneath. Could he fit through? There was a crash as the door of the room next to his was thrown open. He heard one of the men call out in Thai. They would be here in the next few seconds. Alex didn't like to think what he might be letting himself into. The water was a long way down, and the current might suck him beneath the surface. But if he stayed here, he would die for certain. He went over to the hole, took a deep breath, and dropped through it.

He fell into darkness and just had time to put a hand over his nose before he hit the river. The water was warm and sluggish, covered by a layer of filth and rotting vegetation. The stink was almost

unendurable. It was like plunging into the oldest, dirtiest bath in the world. As Alex broke back through the surface, he could feel the liquid, like oil, running down his cheeks and over his lips. Some sort of slime was clinging to his face. He tore it off, forcing himself not to swallow.

He was out of the arena, but he still hadn't escaped. He could hear voices above him and in the distance. It was almost impossible to see anything. He was underneath the building, treading water, surrounded by the concrete pillars that held the place up. In the distance, he could just make out the shape of the boat that must have brought the two men with machine guns. It was moored next to the jetty, its engine still running. There was the stamp of footsteps, and he looked up as two flickering shadows passed above his head. They belonged to men running along the veranda outside the arena. Sukit must have given the order to surround the place. His men would be searching it inch by inch.

And then something climbed onto his shoulder.

It was only now that he remembered the movement he had seen when he had arrived: something living in the water and the shadows beneath the building. Alex reached out and grabbed one of the pillars, steadying himself. Then, very slowly, he turned his head.

It was a river rat, heavy and bloated, at least fifteen inches long, with vicious white teeth and eyes the color of blood. Its tail, curling around behind Alex's neck, added another ten inches to its length, and it was clinging to his shirt with feverish little claws, scrabbling at the material. And it wasn't alone. As Alex froze, in utter horror, two more rats appeared, then a third. Soon the water was swarming with them. Another one climbed onto the side of his face, scratching the skin as it pulled itself on top of his head. Alex wanted to scream—but it was the one thing he couldn't do. There were armed men standing above him, only a few yards away. If he so much as splashed too loud, it would all be over.

Were the rats going to bite him? That was the terrible thought. Would they try to eat him alive? He felt something nudge his shirt. One of the creatures had dived underwater and was trying to burrow its way inside. He could feel its nose and claws, burrowing against the soft flesh of his stomach. With a feeling of nausea, he reached down and gently pushed it away. If he was too rough, the rat would bite him, and once the others got a scent of his blood...

He stopped himself. Better not even to imagine.

His only hope was to do nothing. Let the rats decide that he was just another bit of pollution that had been dumped in the river. I'm not edible. You wouldn't like me. He tried to send his thoughts out to the pack. The rat that had climbed onto his head was now nestling in his hair. Alex winced as it pulled out a few strands and began to chew on them, checking out the taste. The first rat, the one that had started this all, was still on his shoulder. Without moving, Alex looked down and saw a pointed nose twitching right beside his jugular. Behind it, he could make out two black eyes, gleaming with excitement, fascinated by the rapid pulsing—in exact time with Alex's heart. All it had to do was bite through the flesh, find the vein. Alex was certain it was about to strike.

That was when the explosion occurred, a fireball that erupted in the very center of the building. At once, all the rats took flight, leaping off him and disappearing behind the columns. What in the world was going on? Had he perhaps wandered into some war between two rival snakeheads? That didn't matter now. Alex had to move before the rats came back. He launched himself away from the column and swam through the muck, trying to keep his face out of the water.

The arena was on fire. He heard voices yelling and saw the flicker of red in the water. A piece of blazing wood tumbled out of nowhere and fell, hissing and spitting, into the river. Alex glanced upward. The building had been rickety to begin with. He didn't want it collapsing now—not when he was underneath. The jetty was straight ahead of him. Even if there were men standing guard, Alex doubted he would be noticed. With all that was going on inside the building, nobody would be looking down into the water. Anyway, he didn't care anymore. He'd had enough of this. It was time to go.

He reached the side of the boat, a sheer metal wall rising up into fresh air and freedom. There was a net hanging over the side, and Alex grabbed it gratefully. Somehow he found the last reserve of strength he needed to climb up. The boat was one of the old river ferries—with a red roof to show that it crossed continually from one side to the other. There was one man on board—presumably the driver—a Thai wearing jeans and a jacket but no shirt. He was leaning against the side, watching the fire with a look of astonishment.

The wooden building was crackling loudly. Flames had caught hold of the roof and the back wall. They were leaping up into the night sky. The wood was splintering, pieces of it splashing down. Alex didn't even try to keep quiet. He hauled himself over the side rail on the other side of the ferry, behind the driver. The man didn't turn around. Alex ran across the deck, then grabbed him by his collar and belt. He was lucky. The man weighed very little. Alex heaved him up over the rail and into the river. Then, still dripping wet, with the water running into his eyes, he went over to the controls and slammed the throttle as far as it would go.

This was going to be his way out of here. Once he was downriver, nobody would be able to find him. The engines roared and the propellers thrashed at the water, turning it white. The boat surged forward. Alex grinned. But a second later, he was almost thrown off his feet as the boat seemed to slam into a brick wall. Still gripping the steering wheel, he turned around and saw to his dismay that the boat had been moored to one of the columns supporting the arena. The propellers were churning up the water. If the rats were anywhere near, they would have been chopped to pieces. But the boat wasn't going anywhere. A length of rope, almost as thick as Alex's arm, stretched between the stern and the column.

And he didn't have time to untie it. Alex lowered the throttle, afraid that the engines would explode, and the rope sagged. Then somebody shouted something and with a heavy heart he saw Anan Sukit appear on the walkway outside the arena, anger stretching his mouth even farther across his hideous face. He had seen Alex. He still had his gun. Once again he took aim. He was about ten yards away, but he had a clear shot.

Alex did the only thing he could. Once again he slammed down the throttle, and from that moment it seemed to him that everything happened at once.

There were three shots. But Alex hadn't been hit. And it wasn't Sukit who had fired. The snakehead lieutenant seemed to throw his own gun into the river as if he no longer had any use for it. Then he followed it in, pitching headfirst into the water. He had been shot from behind, the bullets hitting him between the shoulders. Alex thought he saw a shadowy figure standing in a doorway, but before he could make out who it was, the boat surged forward. And this time it took the column with it, ripping it out from beneath the burning building.

Alex felt himself propelled into the middle of the river, moving incredibly fast. He risked a last

look back and saw the arena, consumed by fire, sparks dancing above it. In the distance, he could hear fire engines. But they weren't going to be needed. It seemed that he had torn out a vital part of the structure. Even as he watched, the entire building slumped to its knees, as if in surrender, then slid off the bank and into the river. All of it went. The water rushed in through the rotting wood, eager at last to reclaim it. Alex heard screams coming from inside. Another burst of gunfire. And then the Chada Trading Agency had gone as if it had never existed. Only the green sign floated on the surface, surrounded by other pieces of splintered wood and debris. The flames sat briefly on the river before extinguishing themselves. Dozens of dark figures thrashed and shouted in the water, trying to reach dry land.

Alex dragged at the steering wheel and brought the ferry under control. It was incredible, but he really was the only person on board. So which way now? North would take him to familiar territory. He could see the Peninsula Hotel in the far distance. He wondered what he must look like. Bruised, scratched, soaked, in rags—he didn't think they'd be too happy to let him check in.

And anyway, there was still Ash, presumably waiting for him in Chinatown. Alex steered the ferry toward the next public jetty. It seemed they would have to do without the forged papers. He just hoped Ash wouldn't mind.

So far, he had to admit, things hadn't quite gone as planned.

WAT HO

MAJOR WINSTON YU SELECTED an egg-and-cress sandwich and held it delicately between his gloved fingers. He was at the Ritz Hotel in London, which—even if they did allow too many tourists into the main rooms—was still his favorite hotel in the world. And tea was definitely his favorite meal. He loved the little sandwiches, cut in perfect triangles, with a scone served with jam and cream to follow. It was all so very English. Even the bone-china teapot and cup had been made by Wedgwood, the Staffordshire family established in 1759.

He sipped his tea and dabbed his lips with a napkin. The news from Bangkok, he had to admit, was not good. But he wasn't going to let that spoil his tea. His mother had always told him that every cloud has a silver lining, and he was looking for one now. It was true that it wouldn't be easy to replace Anan Sukit. On the other hand, every organization—even a snakehead—needs a change of personnel from time to time. It keeps people on their toes. There were plenty of young lieutenants who deserved promotion. Yu would make a choice in due course.

Much less welcome was the man sitting opposite him. It was very rare for two members of Scorpia to be seen together in public, but Zeljan Kurst had telephoned him and insisted on a meeting. Major Yu had suggested the Ritz, but now he felt it had been a mistake. The big Yugoslavian, with his bald head and wrestler's shoulders, couldn't have looked more out of place. And he was drinking mineral water! Who drank mineral water at four o'clock in the afternoon?

"Why didn't you report to us about the boy?" Kurst asked.

"I didn't think it was relevant," Yu replied.

"Not relevant?"

"This is my operation. I have everything under control."

"That's not what I've heard."

It didn't surprise Yu that the executive board had learned about the destruction of the Chada Trading Agency and the death of Sukit. They were always watching each other's backs, doubtless working out where to place the knives. It was sad that criminals weren't the same anymore. No one trusted anyone.

"We're still not sure what happened last night," Yu said. It might be teatime in England but it was midnight in Bangkok. "It's not even clear the boy was responsible."

"This is Alex Rider," Kurst snapped. "We underestimated him once before and it was an expensive mistake. Why haven't you killed him already?"

"For obvious reasons." Yu's hand hovered over another sandwich, but he changed his mind. He had rather lost his appetite. "I was aware of Alex Rider's presence in Bangkok the moment he arrived," he continued. "I knew they were coming—a boy and a man—even before they left."

"Who told you?"

“That’s my secret, and I intend to keep it that way. I could have arranged to have had the Rider child gunned down at Suvarnabhumi airport. It would have been simple. But that would have told ASIS that I was aware of their plans. They already suspect I have inside information. This would have confirmed it.”

“So what do you intend to do?”

“I want to play with him. The fight at the arena was just the beginning, and there’s no real harm done. The place was falling down anyway. But if you ask me, the situation is quite amusing. Here’s the famous Alex Rider, dressed up as an Afghan refugee. He thinks he’s so clever. But I have him in the palm of my hand and I can crush him at any time.”

“That was what Julia Rothman thought.”

“He’s a child, Mr. Kurst. A very clever child, but a child all the same. I think you’re overreacting.”

Something deadly flickered in Kurst’s eyes, and Yu made a mental note not to eat anything more. He wouldn’t put it past Scorpia to slip a radioactive pellet into an egg-and-cess sandwich. They had done it before.

“We will be monitoring the situation,” Kurst said at length. “And I’m warning you, Major Yu, if we feel that things are getting out of hand, you will be replaced.”

He got up and left.

Yu stayed where he was, thinking about what had just been said. He suspected that Levi Kroll was behind this. The Israeli had been maneuvering to take over control of Scorpia ever since Max Grendel had retired. He had also volunteered for the Reef Island business. He would be itching to move in if Yu failed.

He was not going to fail. Royal Blue had been thoroughly tested by Yu’s operatives in Bangkok. The detonation system had been adapted. And in just two days’ time it would set off on the next leg of its journey. All according to plan. But at the same time, Yu had decided to take out a little insurance. He and he alone would set off the bomb. He was the one who would take the credit for the worldwide devastation that would follow.

But how to stop Kroll from seizing control?

It was very simple. A little technological tinkering and nobody would be able to replace him. Yu smiled to himself and called for the bill.

“I should never have let you go,” Ash exclaimed. “I can’t believe I let them do that to you.”

It was one o’clock in the morning in Bangkok, and Alex and Ash were back in their room on the third floor.

Alex had abandoned the ferry downriver on the other side of an ugly modern bridge. From there, he’d had to find his way across the city on foot, dripping wet, without money and relying only on his sense of direction. He had stopped twice to ask for directions from a monk and from a stall holder closing up for the night. They spoke little English but were able to understand enough to point him in the right direction. Even so, it had been well after midnight by the time he had reached Chinatown.

Ash had been pacing the room like a lion in a cage, sick with worry, and had grabbed hold of Alex when he finally arrived. He had listened to the story with disbelief.

“I shouldn’t have let you go,” he said again.

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I’ve heard about these fights. The snakeheads use them all the time. Anyone who crosses them can end up in the ring. People get crippled...or killed.”

“I was lucky.”

“You were smart, Alex.” Ash looked at him approvingly, as if seeing him in a completely different light. “You say someone was there shooting. They attacked the building. Did you see who they were?”

“I got a glimpse of someone. But I’m sorry, Ash. It was dark and it was all happening too quickly.”

“Were they Thai or European?”

“I didn’t see.”

Alex was sitting on the bed, wrapped in a blanket. Ash had put his clothes out to dry—not that there was much chance of that. The night itself was damp, on the edge of a tropical storm. He had also brought Alex a bowl of chicken broth from the restaurant at the end of the alleyway. Alex needed it. He hadn’t eaten since late that afternoon. He was starving and exhausted.

Ash examined him. “I remember the first time I met your father,” he said suddenly. The change of subject took Alex by surprise. “I’d been sent out on a routine operation...in Prague. I was just backup. He was in charge...for the first time, I think. He was only a couple of years older than me.” He took out a cigarette and rolled it between his fingers. “Anyway, everything that could go wrong did go wrong. A building blown to smithereens. Three ex-KGB agents dead in the street. The Czech police crawling all over us. And he was just like you are now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you take after him,” Ash explained. “John always had the luck of the devil. He’d walk into trouble and somehow he’d get out of it in one piece. And then he’d sit there—the same as you—as if nothing had happened. Untouched by it.”

“His luck ran out in the end,” Alex said.

“Everyone’s luck runs out in the end,” Ash replied, and turned away, a haunted look in his eyes.

They didn’t talk much more after that. Alex finished his soup and fell asleep almost immediately. The last thing he remembered was Ash, hunched over a cigarette, the red tip winking at him in the darkness as if sharing a secret.

Despite everything, Alex woke early the next morning. There were a couple of fat cockroaches crawling up the wall right next to him, but by now he had gotten used to them. They didn’t bite or sting. They were just ugly. He ignored them and got out of bed. Ash had already been out, taking Alex’s wet clothes to a laundry to be spun dry. He got dressed quickly, and the two of them went out for a bowl of *jok*—the rice porridge that many of the stalls served for breakfast.

They ate in silence, squatting on two wooden crates at the edge of the road with the traffic rumbling past. It had rained in the night, and there were huge puddles everywhere that somehow slowed the city down even more. Once again, Ash had slept badly and there were dark rings under his eyes. His wound was hurting him. He did his best not to show it, but Alex noticed him wince as he sat down, and he looked more ragged and drawn out than ever.

“I’m going to have to cross the river,” he said at last.

“The Chada Trading Agency?” Alex shrugged. “You won’t find very much of it left.”

“I was thinking the same thing about our assignment.” Ash threw down his spoon. “I’m not blaming you for what happened last night,” he said. “But it may well be that our friends in the snakehead have no further interest in smuggling us into Australia. One of their main lieutenants is probably dead. And it has to be said, you took out a large chunk of their operation.”

“I didn’t set fire to the arena!” Alex protested.

“No. But you pulled it into the river.”

“That put the fire out.”

Ash half smiled. “Fair point. But I need to find out how things stand.”

“Can I come?”

“Absolutely not, Alex. I think that’s a bad idea. You go back to the room...and watch out for yourself. It’s always possible that they’ll send someone around to settle the score. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He walked off. Alex thought back over what he’d just said. Was Ash angry with him? It was difficult to read his moods...as if a life in the secret service had put any display of emotion under wraps. But Alex could see that things hadn’t quite gone as expected. His job was to infiltrate the snakehead, not start a war with it. And the fake papers that were so important to Ash might well be sitting on the bottom of the river—and the rest of the Chada Trading Agency with them.

Alex got to his feet and began to walk slowly along the street, barely glancing at the brightly colored silks that every shop in this area seemed to sell. Thai main streets certainly weren’t like English ones. In England, things were spread out. Here, you’d get whole clusters of shops all selling the same thing: whole streets of silk, whole streets of ceramics. He wondered how people chose where to go.

He wished Ash had taken him along. The truth was that he didn’t want to spend any more time on his own and he’d had enough of Bangkok. As for his hopes that meeting Ash would tell him anything about himself, so far all he had been given were a few glimpses of the past. He was beginning to wonder if his godfather would ever open up enough to say anything meaningful at all.

He had just reached the top of the alleyway when he realized he was being followed.

Ash had warned him to keep his eyes open—and perhaps it was thanks to him that Alex spotted the man on the other side of the road, half hidden behind a vegetable stall. He didn’t need to look twice. The man had changed his clothes. Gone were the red poppy and the leather jacket. But Alex was absolutely certain. This was the same square, hard-edged face that he had already seen at the airport and then again outside the Peninsula Hotel. Now he was here. He must have been trailing Alex for

days.

The man had dressed himself up as a tourist, complete with camera and baseball cap, but his attention was fixed on the building where Alex and Ash were staying. Perhaps he was waiting for them to come out. Once again, Alex got the feeling that he knew the man from somewhere. But where? In which country? Could this be one of his old enemies catching up with him? He examined the cold blue eyes beneath the fringe of dark hair. A soldier? Alex was just about to make a connection when the man turned and began to walk away. He must have decided that there was no one at home. Alex made an instant decision. To hell with what Ash had told him. He was going to follow.

The man had set off down Yaowarak Road, one of the busiest streets in Chinatown, with huge signs carrying Chinese hieroglyphics high into the air. Alex was confident he wouldn't be seen. As ever, the pavement was cluttered with stalls, and if the man glanced back, Alex could find somewhere to hide in an instant. The real danger was that Alex could lose him. Despite the early hour, the crowds were already out—they formed a constantly shifting barrier between the two of them—and the man could disappear all too easily into a dozen entranceways. There were shops selling gold and spices. Cafés and restaurants. Arcades and tiny alleyways. The trick was to stay close enough not to lose him but far enough away not to be seen.

But the man didn't suspect anything. His pace hadn't changed. He took a right turn, then a left, and suddenly they were out of Chinatown and heading into the Old City, the very heart of Bangkok, where every street seemed to contain a temple or a shrine. The pavements were emptier here, and Alex had to be more careful, dropping farther back and hovering close to doorways or parked cars in case he had to duck out of sight.

They had been walking for about ten minutes when the man turned off, passing through the entrance to a large temple complex. The gateway itself was decorated with silver and mother-of-pearl and opened into a courtyard filled with shrines and statues: a fantastic, richly decorated world where myth and religion collided in a cloud of incense and a blaze of gold and brilliantly colored mosaic.

The Thai word for a Buddhist monastery or temple is *wat*. There are thirty thousand of them scattered across the country, hundreds in Bangkok alone. There was a sign outside this one, giving its name in Thai and—helpfully—in English. It was called Wat Ho.

Alex only had a few moments to take in his surroundings: the ornamental ponds and *bodhi* trees that grow in every *wat* because they once gave shelter to the Buddha. He glanced at the golden figures—half woman, half lion—that guarded the main temple, the delicate slanting roofs, and the *mondops*... incredible, intricate towers with hundreds of tiny figures that must have taken years to carve by hand. A group of monks walked past him. Everywhere there were people kneeling in prayer. He had never been anywhere so peaceful.

The man he was following had disappeared behind a bell tower. Alex was suddenly afraid that he was going to lose him, at the same time wondering what it was that had brought him here. Could he have been mistaken? Could the man be a tourist after all? He hurried around the corner and stopped. The man had gone. In front of him, a crowd of Thais were kneeling at a shrine. A couple of backpackers were having their photograph taken in front of one of the terraces. Alex was angry with himself. He had been too slow. The entire journey had been a waste of time.

He took a step forward and froze as a shadow fell across him and a hand pressed something hard

into his back.

“Don’t turn around,” a voice commanded, speaking in English.

Alex stood where he was, a sick feeling in his stomach. This was exactly what Ash had warned him against. The snakehead had sent someone after him, and he had allowed himself to be led straight into a trap. But why here—in a Thai temple? And how did the man know he spoke English?

“Walk across the courtyard. There’s a red door on the other side of the shrine. Do you see it?”

Alex nodded. The man had a Liverpool accent. It sounded completely weird in the context of a Bangkok temple.

“Don’t turn around. Don’t try anything. We’re going through the door. I’ll give you more instructions on the other side.”

Another jab with the gun. Alex didn’t need any more prompting. He walked away from the bell tower, skirting the Thai people lost in their prayers. Briefly, he considered starting a fight, out here, while there were still witnesses. But it would do him no good. The man could shoot him in the back and disappear before anyone knew what had happened. The moment would come...but not yet.

The red door was set in the wall of a cloister—somewhere for the monks to walk in silent contemplation. It was surrounded by images of the *Ramakien*, the great story of gods and demons known to every child in Thailand. Gods or demons? He had little doubt to which one of them the man belonged.

As he approached, the door clicked open automatically. There had to be a surveillance camera somewhere, but, looking around, Alex couldn’t see it. There was a modern corridor on the other side, with bare brick walls slanting down toward a second door. This one opened too. All the sounds of the temple had faded away behind him. He felt as if he was being swallowed up.

Alex wasn’t going to let that happen. He timed his move very carefully. The second doorway was narrow, leading into a square-shaped hall that could have been the reception area of a lawyer’s office or a stylish private bank. The walls were covered in wooden panels. There was an antique table with a lamp, a fan turning overhead. And more bizarre than anything, on the opposite wall, a picture of the queen of England.

As Alex made his way in, he hesitated, allowing the man to catch up. Then suddenly he punched backward with his elbow, bringing his fist swinging around in the same motion.

It was a move he had been taught when he was training with the SAS in the Brecon Beacons in Wales. The elbow jab winds your man. The fist carries the gun aside, giving you time to spin around and kick out with all your strength. Never try it in the open because you’ll end up getting shot. It only works in a confined space.

But not this time. The man seemed to have been expecting the maneuver. He had simply stepped aside the moment Alex began his move. Alex’s first strike didn’t make contact with anything, and before he could even begin to turn, he felt the cold farewell of the gun pressed against the side of his head.

“Nice try, Cub,” the man said. “But much too slow.”

And that was when Alex knew. “Fox!” he exclaimed.

The gun didn't matter anymore. Alex turned to stand face-to-face with the man—who was now grinning at him like an old friend. Which, in a sense, he was. The two of them had actually met in the Brecon Beacons. There had been four men in the unit to which Alex had been assigned: Wolf, Eagle, Snake, and Fox. None of them had been allowed to use their real names. While he was with them, Alex was Cub. And now that he thought about it, there had been one with a Liverpool accent. It seemed incredible that the two of them should have met up again in Bangkok, but there could be no doubt about it. Fox was standing in front of him now.

“You were at the airport,” Alex said. “I saw you, wearing a poppy.”

“Yes. I should have taken that off. But I'd just flown in from London myself.”

“And you were at the Peninsula Hotel.”

Fox nodded. “I couldn't believe it was you when I first saw you, so I followed you to be sure. I've been keeping an eye on you ever since, Alex. Lucky for you...”

“Last night...” Alex's head swam. “Was that you at the arena? You set the place on fire!”

“I followed you over to Patpong, and I was there when those men picked you up. Then I followed them down to the Chada Trading Agency. It wasn't easy, I can tell you. And it took me ages to weasel my way in. When I arrived, you were already in the ring. I thought you were going to get beaten to a pulp. But I'd seen where the main fuses were, so I sneaked back and turned out all the lights. Then I came looking for you. Things got a bit dicey when the lights came back on and I had to shoot a few of the opposition and throw a couple of grenades. The last time I saw you, you were in a ferry, trying to get away. It might have helped if you'd untied it first.”

“You shot Anan Sukit.”

“Was that his name? Well, he was trying to shoot you. It was the very least I could do.”

“So what is this place?” Alex looked around. “What are you doing in Bangkok? And what's your real name? You can't go on expecting me to call you Fox.”

“My real name's Ben Daniels. You're Alex Rider. Of course, I know that now.”

“You've left the SAS?”

“I got assigned to MI6 Special Operations. And since you ask, that's where you are now. This is what you might call the Bangkok office of the Royal and General Bank.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a door opened on the other side of the hallway and a woman walked into the room. Alex caught it at once...the faint smell of peppermint.

“Alex Rider!” Mrs. Jones exclaimed. “I have to say, you're the last person I expected to see. Come into my office immediately. I want to know—why aren't you at school?”

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

THE LAST TIME ALEX had seen Mrs. Jones, she had been visiting him in a North London hospital. Then she had seemed unsure of herself, regretful, blaming herself for the security lapse that had left Alex close to death on the pavement outside the MI6 offices on Liverpool Street. She had also been at her most human.

Now she was much more like the woman he had first met, dressed severely in a slate-colored jacket and dress with a single necklace that could have been silver or steel. Her hair was tied back, and her face—with those night black eyes—was utterly serious. Mrs. Jones was not exactly attractive, but neither did she try to be. In a way, her looks exactly suited her work as head of MI6, Special Operations, one of the most secretive departments of the British secret service. They gave nothing away.

Once again she was sucking a peppermint. Alex wondered if she had given up smoking at some time. Or was the habit also related to her job? When Mrs. Jones spoke, people had a tendency to die. It wouldn't surprise him if she felt the need to sweeten her breath.

The two of them were sitting in an office on the first floor of the building that stood directly behind Wat Ho. It was a very ordinary room with a wooden table and three leather chairs. Two large square windows looked out over the temple courtyard. Alex knew that all this could be deceptive. The glass was probably bulletproof. There would be hidden cameras and microphones. How many agents were there, mingling among the orange-robed monks? When it came to MI6, nothing was ever quite what it seemed.

Ben Daniels, the man he had known as Fox, was also there. He was younger than Alex had first thought—no more than twenty-two or twenty-three, laid back and thoughtful. He was sitting next to Alex. The two of them were opposite Mrs. Jones, who had taken her place behind the table.

Alex had told her his story, from the time he had splashed down off the Australian coast to his recruitment by ASIS, his meeting with Ash in Bangkok, and his first encounter with the snakehead. He noticed that she had reacted sharply at the mention of Ash. But then, of course, she must have known him. She had been there when his father went undercover, working for Scorpia. She might even have been involved in the operation in Malta that had brought him safely home.

“Well, Ethan Brooke certainly has nerve,” she remarked when he had finished. “Recruiting you without so much as a by-your-leave! He could have talked to us first.”

“I don't work for you,” Alex said.

“I know you don't, Alex. But that's not the point. At the very least you're a British citizen, and if a foreign government is going to use you, they might as well ask.” She softened slightly. “For that matter, whatever prompted you to go back into the field? I thought you'd had enough of all this.”

“I wanted to meet Ash,” Alex said. Another thought occurred to him. “Why did you never tell me about him?” he asked.

“Why should I have?” Mrs. Jones replied. “I haven’t seen him for almost ten years.”

“But he worked for you.”

“He worked for Special Operations at the same time as me. In fact, I had very little to do with him. I met him once or twice. That’s all.”

“Do you know what happened in Malta?”

Mrs. Jones shook her head. “You’d have to ask Alan Blunt,” she said. “That was his operation. You know it was all a setup. John Rider—your father—was pretending to work for Scorpia, and we had to get him back. We set up a fake ambush in a place called Mdina, but it all went wrong. Ash was nearly killed, and shortly after that he left the service. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Where is Mr. Blunt?”

“He’s in London.”

“So why are you here?”

Mrs. Jones looked at Alex curiously. “You’ve changed,” she said. “You’ve grown up a lot. I suppose we’re to thank for that. You know, Alex, we weren’t going to use you again. I’d agreed with Alan—after what happened with Scorpia, that was going to be the end of it. But the next thing I knew, you’re in America, up to your neck in it with the CIA. I ought to congratulate you, by the way. That business with the Ark Angel space station was quite remarkable.”

“Thank you.”

“And now ASIS! You certainly get around.” Mrs. Jones reached forward and flipped open a file lying on the table in front of her. “It’s strange that we should have run into you this way,” she went on. “But it may be less of a coincidence than you think. Major Yu. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“He’s in charge of the snakehead.” Ethan Brooke had told Alex the name when he was in Sydney.

“Well, to answer your question, I’m here because we’re investigating him. That’s why Daniels is here too.” Mrs. Jones tapped the file with her index finger. “How much did ASIS tell you about Major Yu?”

Alex shrugged. He felt uncomfortable suddenly, caught in the middle of two rival intelligence agencies. “Not very much,” he admitted. “They don’t seem to know a lot about him. That’s part of my job...”

“Well, maybe I can help you.” Mrs. Jones paused. “We’ve been interested in Major Winston Yu for some time, although we haven’t managed to find out too much about him ourselves. We know he had a Chinese mother. His father is unknown. He was brought up in poverty in Hong Kong—his mother worked at a hotel—but cut forward eight years and you find him being privately educated in England. He went to Harrow School, for heaven’s sake! How his mother managed to afford the fees is another question.

“He was an average student. We have copies of his reports. On the other hand, he seems to have fit in quite well, which is surprising, considering his race and background. There was a question mark over a rather nasty incident that took place in his first term—a couple of boys killed in a car accident—but nothing was ever proved. He was also very good at sports, a triple house blood, whatever that

means.

“He left with reasonable grades and studied politics at London University, got a degree. After that, he went into the army. Trained at Sandhurst and did much better there. He seems to have taken to army life and was at the top of his class with the highest score in military, practical, and academic studies, for which he received highest honors. He joined one of our country’s most distinguished regiments—the Household Cavalry—and served in the Falklands and the first Gulf War.

“Unfortunately, he developed a bone condition that brought an end to his army career. But he was snapped up by intelligence, and for a time he worked for MI6—not Special Operations. He was fairly low-level, gathering and processing information...that sort of thing. Well, eventually he’d had enough of it because one day he disappeared. We know he was active in Thailand and Australia, but there’s no record of his activities, and it was only recently that we were able to identify him as the leader of one of the most powerful snakeheads in the region.”

Mrs. Jones paused. When she looked up again, her eyes were bleak. “This may put you off, Alex. It may even persuade you to go home—and believe me, I wouldn’t blame you. According to our sources, Major Yu may have contacts with Scorpia. It’s even possible that he’s on the executive board.”

Scorpia. Alex had hoped he would never hear that name again. And Mrs. Jones was right. If Ethan Brooke had given him that information, he might have thought twice about the whole thing. He wondered if the head of ASIS had known. Almost certainly. But he’d needed Alex, so he’d decided to keep it under his hat.

“You still haven’t told me why you’re interested in him,” Alex said.

“That’s top secret.” Mrs. Jones gestured with one hand. “But I’ll tell you anyway. Apart from anything else, it may well be that you’re in a position to help us—assuming that’s something you’d even consider. Anyway, I’ll explain and you can make up your own mind...”

“Have you ever heard of the Daisy Cutter?”

Alex thought for a moment. “It’s a bomb,” he said. He remembered talking about it once at school, during history. “The Americans used it in Vietnam.”

“They’ve also used it in Afghanistan,” Mrs. Jones said. “The Daisy Cutter, also known as BLU-82B or the Blue Boy, is the largest conventional bomb in existence. It’s the size of a car...and I mean a Lincoln. Each bomb contains twelve-and-a-half-thousand pounds of ammonium nitrate, aluminum powder, and polystyrene, and it’s powerful enough to destroy an entire building, easily. In fact, it’ll probably take out a whole block.”

“The Americans used it because it’s terrifying,” Daniels muttered. He was speaking for the first time. “It may not compare to a nuclear bomb, but there’s nothing on the earth like it. The shock wave that it releases is unbelievable. You have no idea how much damage it can do.”

“They used it in Vietnam to clear landing sites for helicopters,” Mrs. Jones went on. “Drop one on the jungle and you’d have no jungle for half a mile around. They called it the Daisy Cutter because that was the pattern the explosion made. It was used in Afghanistan to scare the Taliban...to show them what they were up against.”

“What’s this got to do with Major Yu?” Alex asked. He was also wondering, with a sense of

growing unease, what it might have to do with him.

“For the last few years, the British government has been developing a second generation of Daisy Cutters,” Mrs. Jones explained. “They’ve managed to create a similar type of bomb except that it’s a little smaller and it’s more powerful, with an even greater shock wave. They gave it a code name, Royal Blue, and they’d built a prototype at a secret laboratory just outside London.” She took out a peppermint and twisted off the wrapper with a single movement of her thumb and forefinger. “Three weeks ago the prototype was stolen. Eight of our people were killed. Three of them were security guards. The rest were technicians. It was a very professional operation: perfectly timed, ruthlessly executed.” She slid the peppermint between her lips.

“And you think Major Yu...?”

“These things aren’t easy to transport, Alex. They need to be transported in a Hercules C-130 transport plane. We lost sight of the bomb, but two days later a C-130 took off with a flight plan that brought it to Bangkok via Albania and Tajikistan. We were able to identify the pilot...his name was Feng. He in turn had been employed by a criminal based here in Bangkok...a man called Anan Sukit...”

“...and he works for the snakehead!” Alex finished the sentence.

“He *worked* for the snakehead,” Mrs. Jones remarked sourly. “Until Daniels put three bullets into him.”

It was all beginning to make sense. MI6 Special Operations were chasing a missing bomb that had led them to the snakehead. Alex was investigating the snakehead and that had led him to MI6. It was as if they had met in the middle.

“We were planning to put Daniels into the snakehead,” Mrs. Jones continued. “We’d arranged a cover story for him. He was a rich European who’d flown out from London, hoping to put together a big drug deal. Of course, everything changed the moment he spotted you. As soon as we realized you were here, we decided to keep an eye on you and find out what you were up to. I have to say, we were very surprised when you changed your appearance.” She ran an eye over Alex. “If we hadn’t seen you at the airport, we wouldn’t have recognized you.”

“I like the teeth,” Daniels muttered.

“So what now?” Alex asked. “You said you wanted me to help you.”

“You and Ash have already penetrated the snakehead. You’ve also shaken things up a bit—no surprises there. Maybe you can find Royal Blue for us.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to spot,” Daniels said. “It’s bloody huge. And if it goes bang, you’ll hear it ten miles away.”

Alex considered. Getting involved with MI6 again was the last thing he wanted, but in a way, what Mrs. Jones had told him had changed nothing. He was still working for ASIS. And if he did come across a bomb the size of a family car, there would be no harm in reporting it.

“What do they want it for?” he asked.

“That’s what worries us most,” Mrs. Jones replied. “We’ve got no idea. Obviously they must be planning something big—but not that big. A nuclear bomb would have been about one thousand times

more powerful.”

“So they’re not out to destroy a whole city,” Daniels added.

“But if this is a Scorpia operation, you can be pretty sure it’s serious and large scale. These people aren’t bank robbers...you know that better than anyone. I have to admit, we’re in the dark. Anything you can find out will be helpful to us.”

Once again, Alex fell silent. But he had made up his mind. “I’ll have to tell Ash,” he said.

Mrs. Jones nodded. “I don’t see any harm in that. And in return, we can help you. You and Daniels already know each other. There’s no point in trying to put him in undercover now. But he can continue to watch over you.”

Ben smiled. “I’d be happy to do that,” he said.

“We can give you something to contact him anytime. Has ASIS provided you with any equipment?”

Alex shook his head.

Mrs. Jones sighed. “That’s the trouble with the Australians. They always rush into everything without a second thought. Well, we can give you what you need.”

“Gadgets?” Alex’s eyes lit up.

“You’ve got an old friend here. I think you ought to meet.”

Smithers was down the corridor in a room that was a cross between a library, an office, and a workshop. He was sitting at a desk, surrounded by bits of machinery—like a destructive child on Christmas Day. There was a half-dismantled alarm clock, a laptop computer with its insides spilling out, a video camera divided into about fifty different pieces, and a whole tangle of wires and circuits. Smithers himself was wearing sandals, baggy shorts, and a bright yellow, short-sleeved shirt. Alex wondered how he could possibly carry so much weight around in this heat. But he looked perfectly composed, sitting with his great stomach stretching out toward his knees and two very plump pink legs tucked away below. He was fanning himself with a Chinese fan decorated with two interweaving dragons.

“Alex? Is that you?” he exclaimed as Alex came into the room. “My dear boy! You don’t look like yourself at all. Don’t tell me! You must have spent some time with Cloudy Webber.”

“Do you know her?” Alex asked.

“We’re old friends. The last time we met was at a party in Athens. We were both in disguise, as it happened, and we chatted for half an hour before we recognized each other.” He smiled. “But I can’t believe you’re back again. So much has happened since I last saw you. That was in America. Did my Stingo mosquito lotion come in useful?”

Now it was Alex’s turn to smile. The liquid that Smithers had invented attracted insects instead of repelling them and it had been very useful indeed, helping to get him past a checkpoint on Flamingo Bay. “It was great, thanks,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Mrs. Jones asked me to think up a few gadgets for our agents out here in the East,” Smithers replied. He lifted the fan. “This is one of them. It’s very simple, but I rather like it. You see, it looks

like an ordinary fan, but actually there are very thin plates of galvanized steel hidden under the silk. And when you bring them together..." He folded the fan, then brought it smashing down onto the desk. The wood shattered. "...it becomes a useful weapon. I call it..."

"...the fan club?" Alex suggested.

Smithers laughed. "You're getting used to my little ways," he said. "Anyway, I've had all sorts of ideas since I came to Bangkok." He rifled around the surface of the desk and finally found a packet with a dozen sticks of incense. "Everyone burns incense out here," he explained. "It comes in jasmine and musk and it's rather lovely—but my incense has no smell at all."

"So what's the point?"

"After thirty seconds it will cause a whole room full of people to throw up. It's quite the most disgusting gadget I've ever invented, and I have to say we had no fun at all testing it. But it's still quite useful, I think."

He unfolded a sheaf of drawings. "I'm also working on one of these local taxis. They call them *tuk-tuks*, but this one has got a missile launcher built into the front headlight and a machine gun directly controlled by the handlebars, so I suppose you could say it's an attack *tuk*."

"What's this?" Alex asked. He had reached out and picked up a small bronze Buddha sitting in the lotus position. With its round stomach and bald head, it reminded him a little of Smithers.

"Oh—do be careful with that!" Smithers exclaimed. "That's my Buddha hand grenade. Twist the head twice and throw it and anyone within ten yards can say their prayers."

He took it back and placed it carefully in a drawer.

"Mrs. Jones said you're taking on the snakeheads," he continued, and suddenly he was serious. "You be careful, Alex. I know you've done tremendously well in the past, but these people are seriously nasty."

"I know." Alex thought back to his first meeting with Anan Sukit and the fight in the riverside arena. He didn't need to be told.

"There are all sorts of things I'd love to equip you with," Smithers said. "But as I understand it, you're working undercover as an Afghan refugee. Which means that you won't be carrying very much. Is that right?"

Alex nodded. He was disappointed. Smithers had once given him a Game Boy jammed with special devices, and he would have felt more confident having something like that with him now.

Smithers reached forward and opened an old cigar box. The first thing he took out was a watch, a cheap fairground thing on a plastic strap. He handed it to Alex.

Alex looked at the time. According to the watch, it was six thirty. He shook it. "The watch doesn't work," he said.

"We have to think about the psychology," Smithers explained. "A poor Afghan refugee wouldn't own many possessions, but he would be very proud of the few he did have...even a broken watch. But this watch will work when it matters. There's a powerful transmitter and a battery inside. If you get in trouble, set the hands to eleven o'clock and it will send out a signal that will repeat every ten

minutes for twenty-four hours. We'll be able to pick you up anywhere on the globe."

Smithers rummaged around in the box again and took out three coins. Alex recognized them. They were Thai currency—one baht, five baht, and ten baht, worth about fifty cents between them. "I don't think anyone would worry about a few local coins," he said, "but these are rather fun. They're actually miniature explosives. Let me show you how you detonate them."

He produced a half-empty packet of chewing gum. At least, that was what it looked like. But then he turned it around in his pudgy fingers and slid open a secret panel. There were three tiny switches on the other side, marked with the figures 1, 5, and 10. "This is how it works," he explained. "The coins are magnetic. You have to stick them to a metal surface to activate them. That'll stop you from accidentally blowing them up in your pocket. Then you flick the appropriate switch...just make sure you get the right value. The coins will blow open a lock or even smash a hole in a wall. Think of them as miniature land mines. And do try not to spend them!"

"Thanks, Mr. Smithers."

"And finally, I've got something that might come in very useful if you find yourself off the beaten track." Smithers pulled open a drawer in the desk and took out an old belt with a heavy silver buckle. "You can slip it into your jeans. There's a particularly sharp knife hidden inside the buckle. It's actually made out of toughened plastic, and it's rather cunningly designed so it won't show up on x-ray machines if you go through an airport. And if you slice open the belt, you'll find matches, medicine, water-purifying tablets, and knockout pills that are guaranteed to work on eleven different varieties of snake. I developed it for use in the jungle, and although you're not heading that way, you never know." He handed it across. "It's a shame, really. I'd love to give you the pants that go with it. The legs are highly flammable."

"Exploding jeans?" Alex asked.

"Flares," Smithers replied. He reached out and shook Alex's hand. "Good luck, my boy. And one last word of advice." He leaned forward as if afraid of being overheard. "I wouldn't trust these Australians if I were you. I mean, they're not a bad lot. But they are a bit rough, if you know what I mean. They don't play by the rules. Just keep your wits about you." He tapped the side of his nose. "And call for help the moment you need us. That Ben Daniels is a good guy. He won't let you down."

Alex gathered up his few weapons and left the room. As he left, he heard Smithers humming behind him. The song was that old Australian favorite, "Waltzing Matilda." Alex wondered what Smithers had meant by his warning. Did he really know something that Alex didn't, or was he just being mischievous?

Ben Daniels was waiting on the other side.

"Are you ready, Cub?" he asked.

"Armed and dangerous," Alex replied.

The two of them left together.

THE SILENT STREETS

ASH WAS ALREADY IN the room when Alex got back. At first he was angry.

“Where the hell have you been, Alex?” he growled. “I was worried about you. I told you to wait for me here.” Then his eyes narrowed. He glanced down at Alex’s waist. “That’s a nice belt. Where did you get it?”

Alex was impressed. His godfather had spent half his life as a spy, and of course he had been trained to notice every detail. Despite everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, Ash had immediately picked up on this one tiny change in Alex’s appearance.

“It was given to me,” Alex said.

“Who by?”

“I met some old friends...”

Quickly Alex described what had happened: how he had seen Ben Daniels in the crowd, followed him to Wat Ho, and found himself in the MI6 stronghold. Mrs. Jones had given him permission to tell Ash about Royal Blue, and he mentioned the possible link between Major Yu and Scorpia. Ash’s eyes grew dark when he heard the name.

“Nobody told me they were involved,” he muttered. “I don’t like this, Alex. And nor will Ethan Brooke. You and I are meant to be gathering information. Nothing more, nothing less. Now it’s getting messy.”

“That’s not my fault, Ash.”

“Maybe I should go to this temple, have a word with Mrs. Jones.” Ash thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No. There’s no point in arguing with her. Go on...”

Alex went on with his story. It seemed that he was now working not for one but two secret services. He supposed Ash had a point. The mission had certainly been bent out of shape, and suddenly there was a ticking bomb at the heart of it. Why did Scorpia need Royal Blue? If Scorpia was involved, it was bound to be something big—and they wouldn’t care how many people died. But why this bomb? Why not any other?

Alex tried to put it out of his head. He finished by describing how once again Smithers had equipped him.

“So Smithers is still with MI6!” Ash smiled briefly. “He’s quite a character. And he supplied the belt? What does it do...besides keep your pants up?”

“I haven’t had a chance to examine it yet,” Alex admitted. “But there’s a knife in the buckle. And there’s stuff hidden inside. Some sort of jungle survival kit.”

“Who said you were heading into the jungle?”

Alex shrugged.

Ash shook his head. "I'm not sure you should keep it," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because it may not fit in with your cover. It didn't come from Afghanistan like everything else you're wearing. If we get into any more trouble, it could be noticed."

"Forget it, Ash. I'm keeping it. But if you like, I'll make sure it's out of sight." Alex untucked his shirt and let it hang over the belt.

"What about the watch? Did Smithers give you that too?"

"Yes." Alex wasn't surprised that Ash had also noticed the watch. He held out his wrist. "In case you're wondering, the hands don't move. It's got a transmitter in it. I can call MI6."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I might need help."

"If you need help, you can call me."

"I don't have your number, Ash."

Ash scowled. "I'm not sure ASIS would be too happy about any of this."

Alex held his ground. "I'm not sure I'd be too happy if I ended up dead," he said.

Ash could see that Alex was in no mood for an argument. "All right," he said. "Maybe it's for the best. I won't have to worry about you so much if I know you've got backup. But don't call MI6 without telling me—okay? Promise me that. I don't work for them anymore and when all is said and done, I've got my reputation to consider."

Alex nodded. He had decided not to mention the three exploding coins and the detonators concealed in the chewing gum packet. Ash might try to take those too. He changed the subject. "How did you make out?" he asked. "Did you go to the river?"

Ash lit a cigarette. It still surprised Alex that a man who looked after himself so carefully in every other respect chose to smoke. "It's all good news," he said. "I found the arena where you were taken—or what was left of it—and spoke to a guy called Shaw. You may remember him. He was the one who took the photographs. Richard Shaw. Or Rick to his friends."

"What was he doing there?"

"There were dozens of them, salvaging what they could out of the wreckage. Papers, computer disks...that sort of thing. Our late friend, Mr. Sukit, had his offices there, and there was plenty of stuff they wouldn't want the police to find."

"What did Shaw say?"

"I got him to take me to Sukit's deputy. Another charming guy. Looked like he'd been in a street fight...face all over the place. He obviously had a lot on his mind but I persuaded him to send us on the next step of our journey. After all, we'd paid the money. And you'd done what they wanted. You'd taken part in their fight...even if you had humiliated their champion."

"What about the fire and all the rest of it?"

“Nothing to do with you. They think the Chada Trading Agency was hit by a rival gang. The long and the short of it is that they’re happy to get us out of the way. We leave for Jakarta tonight.”

“Jakarta?”

“We’re moving farther down the pipeline, Alex. They’re smuggling us into Australia via Indonesia. I don’t know how—but it’ll almost certainly involve some sort of ship. Jakarta’s only about forty-eight hours by sea from Darwin. Maybe it’ll be a fishing boat. Maybe something bigger. We’ll find out soon enough.”

“How do we get to Jakarta?”

“We fly just like anyone else.” Ash produced a folder containing two airplane tickets, passports, visas, and a letter of credit written on fancy paper with the name Unwin Toys printed across the top. “We’re being met at Jakarta International Airport,” he went on. “I’m now a sales manager for Unwin Toys. Flying in to look at their new range and bringing my son with me.”

“Unwin Toys...I’ve heard of them.”

The name had seemed familiar the moment he saw it. Now Alex remembered. He had had seen their products all over London, often on market stalls or bargain basements on Oxford Street. They specialized in radio-controlled cars, building kits, and water pistols—always made out of colored plastic, manufactured in the Far East and guaranteed to fall apart a few days after they were opened. Unwin Toys wasn’t a great name, but it was a well-known one and he found it hard to believe that it could be tied in with the snakehead.

It was as if Ash knew what was in his mind. “Think about it, Alex,” he said. “A big company like Unwin Toys would be a perfect cover for a smuggling operation. They’re moving goods all over the world and the fact that they’re for little kids...it’s the last place you’d think of looking.”

Alex nodded. He could imagine it. A crate full of plastic trucks, each one loaded with a stash of heroin or cocaine. Water pistols that were actually the real thing. Teddy bears with God knows what inside. All sorts of unpleasant secrets could hide behind such an innocent facade.

“We’re making real progress,” Ash said. “But we still have to be careful. The more we know, the more dangerous we become to the snakehead.” He thought for a moment. “What you said just now, about calling me. You’re right. I want you to remember a telephone number. Write it on your hand.”

“What telephone number?”

“If anything happens, if we get separated, call the number before you contact anyone else. It’s my cell phone. But the number’s special, Alex. It was given to me by ASIS. You can call from anywhere in the world and you’ll be put through instantly. It will cost you nothing. The numbers will override any security system in any telephone network so you can reach me anytime, anywhere. What do you say?”

Alex nodded. “Fine.”

Ash gave him the number. There were ten digits, but otherwise it was like no cell number Alex had ever heard before. He wrote them on the back of his hand. The numbers would soon fade, but by then he would have memorized them.

“What now?” he asked.

“We rest. Then we get a taxi to the airport. It’s going to be a long night.”

Alex realized the moment had come. They might not be able to speak to each other in Jakarta or on the way to Australia—certainly not in English—and very soon after that, the whole business would be over. Once they had arrived on the northern coast, Alex wouldn’t be needed anymore.

“All right, Ash,” he said. “You promised you’d tell me about my mom and dad. You were the best man at their wedding, and they made you my godfather. And you were there when they died. I want to know all about them because for me, it’s like they didn’t exist. I want to know where I came from... that’s all...and what they thought about me.” He paused. “And I want to know what happened on Malta. You said that Yassen Gregorovich was there. Was he the one who gave you that scar on your stomach? How did that happen? Was my dad to blame?”

There was a long silence. Then Ash nodded slowly. He stubbed out his cigarette.

“All right,” he said. “On the plane.”

They were thirty thousand feet above the Gulf of Thailand, heading south on the short flight to Jakarta. The plane was only half full. Alex and Ash had a whole row to themselves, right at the back. Ash had smartened himself up a little with a white shirt and a cheap tie. He was, after all, meant to be a sales manager. But Alex hadn’t changed. He was grubby and a little ragged, still wearing the clothes he had been given in Bangkok. Perhaps that was why the two of them had been seated on their own. In front of them, the other passengers were dozing in the strange half-light of the cabin. Outside, the sun had set. The plane hung in the darkness.

Ash hadn’t spoken while they took off and climbed into the sky. He had accepted two miniature whisky bottles from the stewardess, but he was still sitting in silence, his dark eyes blacker than ever, fixed on the ice in his glass as it slowly melted. He looked even more bummed out than usual. Alex had noticed him swallow two pills with his drink. It had taken him a while to realize that Ash was in constant pain. He was beginning to wonder if his godfather really was going to tell him what he wanted to know.

And then, without warning, Ash began to speak.

“I met your dad on my first assignment for Special Operations. He’d only joined a year before me, but he was completely different. Everyone knew John Rider. Top of his class. Golden boy. On the fast track to the top.” There was no rancor in Ash’s voice. There was no emotion at all. “He couldn’t have been more than twenty-four. Recruited out of the parachute force. Before that he’d been at Oxford University. A first class degree in politics and economics. And—oh yes—did I mention that he was also a brilliant athlete? Rowed for Oxford—and won. A good tennis player too. And now he was in Prague, in charge of his first operation, and I was a nobody sent along to learn the ropes.

“Well, as it turned out, the whole thing was a shambles. It wasn’t John’s fault. Sometimes it just happens that way. But afterward, at the debriefing, I met him properly for the first time and you know what I liked most about him? It was how calm he was. Three agents had died...not ours, thank God. The Czech police were going crazy. And the Museum of East European Folk Art and Antiquities had burned down. Actually, it wasn’t really a museum, but that’s another story. And as I say, your dad was more or less the same age as me and he wasn’t even worried. He didn’t shout at anyone. He never lost his temper. He just got on with it.

“After that, we became friends. I’m not sure how it happened. We lived near each other—he had an apartment in an old warehouse in Blackfriars, set back from the river. We started playing squash together. In the end we must have played about a hundred games, and you know what? I won at least a couple of them. Sometimes we met for a drink. He liked Black Velvet. Champagne and Guinness. He was away a lot, of course, and he wasn’t allowed to tell me what he’d been doing. Even though we were in the same service, I didn’t have clearance. But you heard things...and I looked in on him a couple of times when he was in the hospital. That was how I met your mother.”

“She was a nurse.”

“That’s right. Helen Beckett. That was her maiden name. She was very attractive. Same color hair as you. And maybe the same eyes. I actually asked her out, if you want to know. She turned me down very sweetly. It turned out that she actually knew your dad from Oxford. They’d met a couple of times when she was studying medicine.”

“Did she know what my dad did?”

“I don’t know what he told her, but she probably had a pretty good idea. When you’re treating someone with two broken ribs and a bullet wound, you don’t imagine they fell over playing golf. But it didn’t bother her. She looked after him. They started seeing each other. The next thing I knew, she had moved in with him and we weren’t playing squash quite so often.”

“Did you ever get married, Ash?” Alex asked.

Ash shook his head. “Never met the right girl...although I had fun with quite a few of the wrong ones. I’m actually quite glad, Alex. I’ll tell you why.

“You can’t afford to get scared in our business. Fear’s the one thing that will kill you faster than anything, and although it’s true to say that all agents are fearless, generally what that means is that they’re not afraid for themselves. All that changes when you get married, and it’s even worse when you have kids. Alan Blunt didn’t want your dad to marry. He knew that in the end, he’d be losing his best man.”

“He knew my mother?”

“He had her investigated.” Alex looked shocked, and Ash smiled. “It was standard procedure. He had to be sure she wasn’t a security risk.”

So somewhere inside MI6 Special Operations there was a file on his mother. Alex made a mental note of it. Maybe one day it would be something he would dig up.

“I was quite surprised when John asked me to be his best man,” Ash went on. “I mean, he was such a hotshot and nobody had even noticed I existed. But he didn’t really have much choice. His brother, Ian, was away on an assignment...and there’s something else you might as well know. Spies are pretty solitary. It goes with the territory, and I was the closest thing he had to a best friend. John was still seeing one or two people from the university—he’d told them he was working for an insurance company—but friendship doesn’t really work when you have to lie all the time.”

Alex knew that was true. It was the same for him at school. Everyone at Brookland believed he had been struck down by a series of illnesses in the past ten months. He’d been back at school a bit, and he’d even joined a school trip to Venice. But he’d felt like an outsider. Somehow his friends knew that something wasn’t adding up and the knowledge made them less good friends than they had once

been.

“Did he have any other family?” he asked.

“Apart from his brother?” Ash shook his head. “There was no family that I knew of. The wedding was at a registry office in London. There were only half a dozen people there.”

Alex felt a twinge of sadness. He would have liked his mother to have had a white wedding in a country church with a big party in a tent and speeches and dancing and too much to drink. After all, he already knew, her happiness wasn't going to last long. But he understood that he was getting a glimpse of a secret agent's life. Friendless, secretive, and a little empty. The plane trembled briefly in the air, and farther down the aisle, one of the call lights blinked on. Outside the window, the sky was very black.

“Tell me more about my mother,” Alex said.

“I can't, Alex,” Ash replied. He twisted in his seat, and Alex noticed a flicker of pain in his eyes. The pills hadn't kicked in yet. “I mean, she liked to read. She went to the movies a lot—she preferred foreign films if she had a choice. She never bought expensive clothes, but she still looked good.” Ash sighed. “I didn't know her that well. And she didn't really trust me, if you want the truth. Maybe she blamed me. I was part of the world that put John in danger. She loved your dad. She hated what he did. And she was smart enough to know that she couldn't talk him out of it.”

Ash opened the second miniature and poured the contents into his plastic glass.

“Helen found out she was expecting you at around the same time that John was sent out on his toughest assignment,” Ash continued. “The two things couldn't have happened at a worse time. But a new organization had come to the attention of MI6. I don't need to tell you its name. I guess you know more about Scorpia than I do. Anyway, there it was: an international network of ex-spies and intelligence officers. People who'd gone into business for themselves.

“At first, they were useful. You have to remember that MI6 actually welcomed them when they first arrived. If you wanted information about what the CIA was up to or how the Iranians were getting on with their nuclear program, Scorpia would sell it to you. If you wanted to do something outside the law with no way of having it traced back to you, there they were. That was the whole point about them. They were loyal to no one. They were only interested in money. And they were very good at their job. Until you came along, Alex, they had never really failed.

“But MI6 got worried about them. They could see that Scorpia was getting out of control... particularly when a couple of their own agents got murdered in Madrid. All around the world, intelligence agencies were regulated, which is to say they played by the rules...at least, to a certain extent. But not Scorpia. They were growing bigger and more powerful, and at the same time they were becoming more ruthless. They didn't care how many people they killed so long as they got their check.

“So Alan Blunt—who'd just become the director of MI6 Special Operations—decided to put your father into Scorpia. The idea was to put him inside the organization...to get them to recruit him. Once he was there, he'd find out everything he could about them. Who was on the executive board? Who was paying them? Who were their connections within the intelligence agencies? That sort of thing. But to do that, MI6 had to put your dad into deep cover. That meant faking everything about him.”

“I know about this,” Alex interrupted. “They pretended he’d been in jail.”

“They actually sent him to jail for a time. They had to be thorough. There were newspaper stories about him. Everyone turned against him. It looked like he lost all his money and he had to sell the apartment. He and Helen moved to some dump in Bermondsey. By then she was three months pregnant. It was very hard on her.”

“But she must have known the truth.”

“I can’t tell you that. Maybe your dad told her. Maybe he didn’t.”

Alex couldn’t believe that. Somehow he was sure his mother must have known.

“Either way, the setup worked,” Ash continued. “He was recruited into Scorpia. They sent him to their training facility on the island of Malagosto, just a couple of miles from Venice.”

The name made Alex shiver. He had been sent there himself when Scorpia had tried to recruit him.

“As far as Scorpia was concerned, John Rider was a gift,” Ash said. “He was a brilliant operator. He had a track record inside British intelligence. And he was desperate. He was also a very good-looking man, by the way. One of the senior executives at Scorpia took a fancy to him.”

“Julia Rothman.” Alex had met her too. She had talked about his father over dinner in Positano.

“The very same. She quickly saw John’s potential, and soon he was a senior training officer with special responsibility for some of Scorpia’s younger recruits. And she gave him a code name. He was called Hunter.”

“How do you know all this?” Alex asked.

“That’s a good question.” Ash smiled. “Because, finally, someone had noticed I existed. Alan Blunt sent me out to shadow John in the field. I was his backup. My job was to stay close but not too close...to be there if he needed to make contact. And that’s how I came to be there when it all ended.”

“In Malta.”

“Yeah. In Malta.”

“What happened?”

“Your dad was coming in. He’d had enough of Scorpia *and* MI6. You were on your way into the world. John just wanted a normal life—and anyway, he’d achieved what he’d set out to do. Thanks to him, we knew the entire structure of command within Scorpia. We had the names of most of their agents. We knew who was paying them and how much.

“The job now was to bring him home without arousing suspicion. Julia Rothman would kill him if she found out he was a spy. The plan was to get him back to England and then let him disappear. A new home. A new identity. The whole works...he’d start a new life in France with your mom. I should have mentioned that he spoke fluent French, by the way. If things had gone the way they’d planned, you’d be speaking French now. You’d be in a lycée in Marseilles or somewhere and you wouldn’t know anything about all this.

“Well, it was right at this time that Scorpia provided the opportunity to get John out. There was a man called Caxero. He was a petty criminal. A drug dealer, a money launderer...that sort of thing. But he must have rubbed someone the wrong way because someone had paid Scorpia to hit him. Your

dad was sent to do the job.

“Caxero lived in Mdina in the middle of Malta. It’s an old citadel, completely surrounded by walls. In fact *madina* is an Arabic word meaning exactly that...‘walled city.’ Caxero’s hometown had another name too. It was so quiet and full of shadows, even in the winter, that the locals called it the silent city. And MI6 realized it was the perfect place for the ambush that would bring John home.

“Your dad wasn’t sent there alone. He was accompanied by a young assassin, one of the best who ever came out of Malagosto. I understand you met him. His name was Yassen Gregorovich.”

Alex shivered again. He couldn’t help himself. They were certainly digging deep into his past tonight.

He had met Yassen on his first mission and remembered the slim, fair-haired Russian with the ice-cold eyes. Yassen could have killed Alex then but had chosen not to. And then they had met a second time in the south of France. It had been Yassen who had led him into the nightmare world of Damian Cray. Alex thought back to the last moments they had been together. Once again Yassen had refused to kill him, and this time it had cost him his own life.

“What can you tell me about Yassen?” he asked.

“An interesting young man,” Ash replied—but there was a sudden coldness in his voice. “He was born in a place called Estrov. You won’t have heard of it but it was certainly of interest to us. The Russians had a secret facility there...bio-chemical warfare, but one day the whole place blew up. Hundreds of people were killed—and Yassen’s father was one of them. His mother died six months later.

“The Russians tried to hush the whole thing up. They didn’t want to admit anything had happened, and even now, we don’t know the whole truth. But one thing was certain. By the end of the year, Yassen was totally alone. He was just fourteen years old, Alex. The same age as you are now.”

“How did Scorpia find him?”

“He found them. He crossed the whole of Russia on his own, with no money and no food. He worked in Moscow for a while, living on the street and running errands for the local Mafiya. We still don’t know how he managed to find his way to Scorpia, but the next thing we know, he turns up in Malagosto. Curiously, your dad was in charge of his training for a time. He told me the boy was a natural. It’s funny, isn’t it. In a way, you and Yassen had a lot in common.” Ash turned to Alex, and he seemed suddenly ghostlike in the artificial light of the plane. A strange look came into his eyes. “John had a soft spot for Yassen,” he said. “He really liked him. What do you make of that? The spy and the assassin. A bit of an odd couple, I’d say...”

And more than ten years later, Yassen had sacrificed himself for Alex, repaying the debt of an old friendship. But Alex didn’t tell Ash that. For some reason, he wanted to keep it to himself.

“This was the deal,” Ash said. Suddenly he sounded tired, like he wanted to get this over with. “Caxero was a man of habit—and that’s dangerous if you’re in crime. He liked to have a black coffee and a cognac every night at a little café in the square opposite St. Paul’s Cathedral in Mdina. That was where they were going to kill him. John let me know when the hit was arranged. It was going to be at eleven o’clock at night on November 11. All the elevens. We’d be there waiting. We’d let them take Caxero—he was a nasty piece of work and we might as well let Scorpia get him out of the way

—and then we'd move in and grab John. But we'd let Yassen escape. He'd report back to Scorpia. He'd tell them that their man had been captured.

“It had to look good. I was in charge of the operation. This was the first time I was given command. I had nine men, and even though John was our target, we were all carrying real ammunition—not blanks. Yassen might have been able to tell the difference. He was that smart. We were all wearing concealed body armor. John wouldn't be aiming at us when we moved in, but Yassen would. And we already knew he was a crack shot.

“I'd put a couple of my people in place that morning. The cathedral had these two towers—one on either side—and I put one in each. I remember it also had two clocks. One of them was five minutes slow. I thought it was strange, the two faces showing different times. Anyway, the men in the towers had night vision glasses and radios. They could see the whole town from up there. They'd make sure that nothing went wrong.”

Ash paused.

“Everything went wrong, Alex. Everything.”

“Tell me.”

Ash sipped his whisky. All the ice had melted.

“We arrived at Mdina just after ten thirty. It was a beautiful night. This was November, and all the tourists had gone. There was a sliver of a crescent moon and a sky full of stars. As we came in through the south gate, it was like stepping back a thousand years in time. The roads in Mdina are narrow and the walls are high. And all the bricks are different shapes and sizes. You can almost imagine them being put in place one by one.

“The whole place felt deserted. The shutters were closed on the houses, and the only light seemed to come from the wrought-iron lamps hanging over the corners. As we made our way up the Triq Villgaignon—that was the name of the main street—a horse-drawn carriage crossed in front of us. They use them to ferry tourists, but this one was on its way home. I can still hear the echo of the horse's hooves and the rattle of the wheels on the cobbles.

“I got a whisper in my earpiece from the lookout in the tower. Caxero was in his usual place, drinking his coffee and smoking a cigar. No sign of anyone else. It was a quarter to eleven.

“We crept forward...past an old chapel on one side of the road, a crumbling palazzo on the other. All the shops and restaurants were closed—some for the whole winter. I had seven men with me. We were all dressed in black. We'd spent half the day studying the map of Mdina, and I signaled them to spread out. We were going to surround the square, ready to move in.

“Ten to eleven. I could see the time on the cathedral clock. And there was Caxero. He was a short, round man in a suit. He had a fancy mustache, and he was holding his coffee cup with his little finger pointing into the air. There were a couple of cars parked in the square next to some cannons and a waiter standing in the door of the café. Otherwise, nothing.

“But then, suddenly, they were there...John Rider and Yassen Gregorovich—or Hunter and Cossack. Those were the names they used. They were five minutes early...that was what I thought. That was my first mistake.”

“The clocks...”

“The cathedral clocks. Yes. One was right and one was wrong and in all the tension I’d been looking at the one that was five minutes slow. As for Yassen, it was like some trick in a movie. One minute he wasn’t there, the next he was, with John next to him. It was a ninja technique—how to move and to stay invisible—and the irony was it was probably your dad who’d taught him.

“I don’t think Caxero saw them coming. They walked straight up to him and he was still holding that coffee cup in that stupid way. He looked up just as a complete stranger shot him in the heart. Yassen didn’t do it quickly. I remember thinking that I’d never seen anyone so relaxed.

“I was worried that my men wouldn’t be in place yet, that not all the exits from the square would be covered. But in a way that didn’t matter. Don’t forget. We wanted Yassen to escape. That was part of the plan.

“I stepped out of my hiding place.

“Yassen saw me and all hell broke loose.

“Yassen fired at me. Two of his bullets missed, but I felt the third slam into my chest. It was like being hit by a sledgehammer, and if I hadn’t been wearing an armor-plated vest, I’d have been killed. As it was, I was blown off my feet. I went smashing down into the cobbles, almost dislocating my shoulder. But I didn’t hang around, Alex. I got straight back up again. That was my second mistake. I’ll come to that later.

“Anyway, suddenly everyone was firing at once. The waiter turned around and dived for cover. About half a second later, the plate-glass window of the café shattered. It came down like a shower of ice. The men high up in the cathedral were using rifles. The others were entering the square from different sides. Your dad and Yassen had separated—as I knew they would. It was standard procedure. Staying together would have just made it easier for us to catch both of them. For a moment, I thought everything was going to work out all right after all.

“It didn’t.

“Three of my men grabbed hold of John. They’d cornered him, and it really would look as if there had been nothing he could have done. They made him throw down his weapon and lie flat on his face. That left three others to go after Yassen. Of course, they’d let him get away. But it would still be close. That was the plan.

“Only Yassen Gregorovich had plans of his own. He was halfway across the square, making for one of the side streets. But then suddenly he stopped, turned around, and fired three times. The gun had a silencer. It hardly made any sound. And this time he wasn’t aiming for the chest. His bullets hit one of my men between the eyes, one in the side of the neck, and one in the throat. Two of them died instantly. The third went down and didn’t move.

“There was still one agent left. His name was Travis, and I’d chosen him personally. He was on the far side of the square, and I saw him hesitate. He didn’t know what to do. After all, I’d given him orders not to shoot Yassen. Well, he should have disobeyed me. The situation was out of control. Enough people had already died that night. He should have got the hell out of there—but he didn’t. He just stood there and Yassen gunned him down too. A bullet in the leg to bring him down and then another in the head to finish him off. The whole square was littered with bodies. And this whole thing

was meant to be bloodless!”

Ash fell silent.

Alex noticed he had finished his whisky. “Do you want another drink, Ash?” he asked.

Ash shook his head. Then he went on.

“Yassen had gone. We had John. So in a way, we’d succeeded. Maybe I should have left it at that. But I couldn’t. This was my first solo operation, and Yassen Gregorovich had wiped out almost half my task force. I went after him.

“I don’t know what I was thinking. Part of me knew that I couldn’t kill him. But I couldn’t just let him go. I pulled off my body armor. It had a quick release and I couldn’t run with it on. Then I started across the square and toward the northern wall. I heard someone shout after me—it might even have been John. But I didn’t care. I turned a corner. I remember the pink stone and a balcony like something in an opera house. I couldn’t see anyone. I thought Yassen must have got away.

“And then, without any warning, he stepped out in front of me.

“He’d waited! A whole town crowded with MI6 agents and he’d just stood there like he owned the place and none of us could touch him. I ran straight into him. I couldn’t stop myself. His hand moved so fast that I didn’t see it. I felt it smash into the nerve points in my wrist. I lost my gun. It went spinning away into the darkness. At the same time, his gun pressed against my neck.

“He was ten years younger than me. A Russian kid who’d got sucked into all this because his parents had died in an accident. And he’d beaten me. He’d taken out half my team. I was going to be next.

““Who are you?” he asked.

““MI6,” I told him. There was no point in lying. We wanted Scorpia to know.

““How did you know I would be here?”

“I didn’t answer that. He pushed harder with the gun. It was hurting me. But that didn’t matter. It would all be over soon anyway.

““You should have stayed home,” he said.

“And then he turned and ran.

“To this day, I don’t know why he didn’t shoot me. Maybe his gun had jammed. Or maybe it was simpler than that. He’d killed Caxero, Travis, and three more of my men. Maybe he’d run out of ammunition. I watched him disappear down the next alleyway, and that was when I realized that he’d had a knife as well as a gun. The hilt was sticking out of my stomach. I didn’t feel anything. But looking down...there was so much blood. It was pouring out of me. It was everywhere.”

Ash stopped. The soft scream of the plane’s engines rose in pitch for a moment. Alex wondered if they were coming into Jakarta.

“The pain came later,” Ash said. “You have no idea how bad it was. I should have died that night. Maybe I would have. Only your dad had come after me. He’d feared the worst—and he’d put his own life at risk because if Yassen had seen him, he would have known that the whole thing was a setup. By then I was on the ground. I was slipping away fast. And I was cold. I’ve never felt so cold.

“Your father didn’t take the knife out. He knew that would kill me right away. He put pressure on the wound and kept it there until the ambulance came. I was airlifted to Valetta, where I was in critical condition for a week. I’d lost five pints of blood. In the end, I came through, but...you’ve seen the scar. I’m missing about half my stomach. There wasn’t anything they could do about that. There are about a hundred things I’m not allowed to eat because there’s nowhere for them to go. And I have to take pills...a lot of pills. But I’m alive. I suppose I should be grateful for that.”

There was a long silence.

“Scorpia got my dad in the end,” Alex said.

“Yeah. A couple of months later. After you were born. I was there at the christening, Alex. It was almost the last time I saw your dad—and if it makes you feel any better, I never saw him happier than when he was holding you. He and your mother. It was like you made them real people again. You took them out of the shadows.”

“You went with them to the airport. They were on their way to France. You said they were going to Marseille.”

“They were looking for a new house. More than that. A new life.”

“You were there when the bomb went off on their plane.”

Ash looked away. “I said I wouldn’t talk about that and I meant it. Somehow Scorpia found out they’d been tricked and they took revenge. That’s all I know.”

“What happened to you, Ash? Why did you leave MI6?”

“I’ll tell you that, Alex, but that’s the end of it. I think I’ve lived up to my side of the bargain.”

Ash crumpled his plastic glass and shoved the broken pieces into the compartment in front of him.

“I didn’t come out of it too well, if you want the truth,” he said. “I was on sick leave for six weeks, and the day I got back to Liverpool Street, Alan Blunt called me into his office. He then chewed me out for everything that had gone wrong.

“First of all, there was the thing with the time. The wrong clock. But it turned out that the most stupid mistake I’d made was to stand up after Yassen had shot me. You see, that had told him we were all wearing body armor and that was the reason he’d shot Travis and the others in the head. It was all my fault...at least, according to Blunt.”

“That wasn’t fair,” Alex muttered.

“You know what, mate? I thought more or less the same thing. And finally, chasing after Yassen when the whole point was to let him get away. That was the final nail in my coffin. Blunt didn’t fire me. But I was demoted. He made it clear that I wouldn’t be heading up any more operations for some time to come. It didn’t matter that I’d almost been killed. In a way, that just made it worse.”

Ash shook his head.

“It was a little while later that your parents died together on that plane, and after that my heart sort of went out of it. I told you when we were in Bangkok. It was your dad who was the patriot, serving his country. For me it was always just a job. And I’d had enough of it. I did a few more months’ desk duty, but then I handed in my resignation and headed down under. ASIS were keen to have me. And I

wanted to start again.

“I saw you a few times, Alex. I looked in on you to see that you were okay. After all, I was your godfather. But by then Ian Rider had started adoption proceedings. I had a drink with him the night before I left England, and he told me he was going to look after you and it was obvious you didn’t need me. In fact, if truth be told, you were probably better off without me. I hadn’t been much help, had I!”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself,” Alex said. “I don’t.”

“Anyway, I saw you again one more time. I was in London, working with the Australian embassy. You were still in elementary school—and Jack was looking after you.”

“You went out with her.”

“A couple of times. We had a laugh together.”

Ash glanced briefly at Alex as if searching for something. “I couldn’t believe it when I heard that MI6 had recruited you,” he muttered. “Alan Blunt doesn’t miss a trick. And then, when you wound up in Australia! But I still wish you hadn’t come on this mission, Alex. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“A bit late now, Ash.”

The lights in the cabin came back on. The stewardesses began to move up the aisle. At the same time, Alex felt his stomach lurch as they began to come down.

They had arrived in Jakarta, the next step on their way. The end of the pipeline was in sight.

UNWIN TOYS

SOMETIMES ALEX WONDERED IF all the airports in the world hadn't been designed by the same architect: someone with a love of shops and corridors, plate-glass windows and potted plants. Here he was at Soekarno-Hatta, the international airport of Jakarta, but it might just as well have been Perth or Bangkok. The floors might be more polished and the ceilings higher. And every other shop seemed to be selling rattan furniture or the colorful printed cloth known as batik. But otherwise he could have been right back where he started.

They came through passport control quickly. The official in his glass-fronted booth barely glanced at the forged documents before stamping them, and without a word being spoken, they were in. Nor did they have to wait at baggage claim. They had just one suitcase between them, and Ash had carried it on and off the plane.

Alex was tired. It was as if the events of the last five days in Bangkok had finally caught up with him, and all he wanted to do was sleep—although somehow he doubted he would spend what was left of the night in a comfortable bed. Most of all, he wanted time on his own to reflect over what Ash had told him. He had learned more about his past in the last hour than he had in his entire life, but there were still questions he wanted to ask. Had his father blamed Ash for the mistakes that had been made in Mdina? Why had his parents decided to go to France, and why had Ash been with them at the airport? What had he seen that he was so unwilling to talk about?

They passed into the arrivals area, and once again they were surrounded by a crowd of touts and taxi drivers. This time there were two men waiting for them, both Indonesian, slim and slightly effeminate in jeans and short-sleeved shirts. One of them was holding a placard that read: Karim Hassan. Alex stared at it for a few seconds before the name registered, and he was annoyed with himself. He had completely forgotten that it was the name under which Ash was traveling. Ash was Karim. He was Abdul. It didn't matter how tired he was. A mistake like that could get them both killed.

Ash went over to them and introduced himself using a mixture of Dari and sign language. The two men didn't even try to be friendly. They simply turned and walked away, expecting Ash and Alex to follow.

It was ten o'clock, and outside, away from the artificial climate of the air-conditioning, the heat was thick and unwelcoming. Nobody spoke as they crossed the main concourse to the curbside where a dirty white van was parked with a third man in the driving seat. The van had sliding doors and, at the back, no windows. Alex glanced nervously at Ash. He felt as if he was about to be swallowed up, and he remembered the last time he had gotten into a car with members of the snakehead. But Ash didn't look worried. Alex followed him in.

The door slammed shut. The two men got in front with the driver, and they moved off. Alex and Ash sat on a metal bench that had been welded to the floor. Their only view was out the front window, and that was so filthy, Alex wondered how even the driver could see where they were going. The van was at least ten years old and had no suspension at all. Alex felt every bump, every

pothole. And there were plenty of both.

The airport was about twelve miles from the city, connected by a highway that was clogged with traffic even at this time of the night. Squinting over the driver's shoulder, Alex barely saw anything until, at last, Jakarta came into sight. It reminded him at first of Bangkok, but as they drew closer, he saw that it was uglier and somehow less sure of itself, still struggling to escape from the sprawling shantytown it had once been.

The traffic was horrible. They were carried into Jakarta on a concrete overpass, and suddenly there were cars and motorcycles above them and below them as well as on both sides. Skyscrapers—bulky rather than beautiful—rose up ahead, a thousand lightbulbs burning uselessly in offices that must surely be empty, coloring the night sky yellow and gray. There were brightly colored food stalls—*warungs*—along the sidewalks. But nobody seemed to be eating. The crowds were drifting home like sleepwalkers, pushing their way through the noise and the dirt and the heat as the storm clouds closed in overhead.

They turned off the overpass and seemed to leave the main sprawl of the city as quickly as they had entered it. Suddenly the van was rumbling over a dirt track, splashing through puddles, and weaving around loose bricks and rubble. There were no streetlamps, no signs, no illumination from a moon that had been blocked out by cloud. Alex saw only what the headlights showed him. This was some sort of suburb, a slum area with narrow streets, houses with tin roofs and corrugated iron patches, walls held up by wooden scaffolding. Strange, spiky shrubs and stunted palm trees grew out of the side of the road. There was no pavement. Somewhere a dog barked. But nowhere was there any sign of life.

They came to a gate that seemed to have been bolted together from pieces of driftwood. Two words—in Indonesian letters—had been scrawled across it in red paint. As they approached, the driver pressed a remote control in the van and the gate opened, allowing them into a large, square compound with warehouses and offices, lit by a couple of arc lamps and fenced in on all sides. The van stopped. They had arrived.

No one else seemed to be there. The doors of the van were pulled back, and the two men led Alex and Ash into one of the warehouses. Alex saw crates piled high, some of them open, spilling out straw and plastic toys. There was a pile of scooters, tangled together, a Barbie house lying on its side. A furry monkey was slumped with its legs apart, foam hanging out of a gash in its stomach, staring at them with empty glass eyes. Alex hoped it wasn't an omen. He had never seen a collection of toys that looked less fun. From the look of them—dusty and dilapidated—they could have been here for years.

Two thin mattresses spread out on the floor told him the worst. This was where they were supposed to sleep. There was no sign of any toilet or anywhere to wash. Ash turned to the men and signaled, cupping his hand against his mouth. He was thirsty. The men shrugged and walked out.

It was to be the longest nine hours of Alex's life. He had no sheets or blankets, and the mattress did almost nothing to protect him from the stone floor underneath. He was sweating. His clothes were digging into him. The whole of Jakarta was in the grip of a storm that refused to break, and the air seemed to be nine parts water. Worst of all were the mosquitoes. They found him almost immediately and refused to leave him alone. There was no point slapping at his face, and after a while Alex stopped bothering. The mosquitoes didn't seem to care. The only escape would be sleep, but sleep

refused to come.

Ash couldn't talk to him. There was always a chance there might be microphones in the room. Anyway, he was used to this. To Alex's annoyance, his godfather was asleep almost at once, leaving him on his own to suffer through every minute of the night.

But at last the morning came. Alex must have drifted into some sort of half sleep because the next thing he knew, Ash was shaking him and gray daylight was seeping in through the windows and the open door. Someone had brought them two glasses of sweet tea and a basket of bread rolls. Alex would have preferred eggs and bacon but decided it was probably better not to complain. Squatting on his mattress, he began to eat.

What was going on? Alex realized that the false passports they had been given in Bangkok had been enough to get them into Indonesia but that Australia, with far stricter border controls, would prove more difficult. The island of Java was about as near as they could get to Australian soil, and the last part of the journey would have to be taken across the sea—a passage of just forty-eight hours, Ash had said. The place they were in now was connected to Unwin Toys...a storage depot and office complex from what Alex had seen the night before. They were going to have to wait here until their boat was ready. And what sort of boat would that be? He would find out in good time.

Shortly after nine o'clock, one of the two men who had met them in the airport came for them and led them out of the warehouse where they had slept. The morning light was thick and gloomy, but at least it allowed Alex to take better stock of his surroundings. Unwin Toys reminded him of an old-fashioned prisoner-of-war camp, something out of a movie from World War II. The buildings were made of wood and seemed to have been slapped together in a hurry, using whatever was at hand, with rickety staircases leading up to the first floor. The main square was cracked and uneven, with weeds sprouting out of the cement. It was hard to imagine an innocent toy wrapped up under a Christmas tree in England might have begun its life here.

By now there were a dozen or so men and women in the complex. Some of them were office staff, sitting behind windows, tapping away at computers. A truck had arrived and there were people unloading it, passing cardboard boxes from hand to hand. Two guards stood by the gate. They seemed to be unarmed but—with the wire fence surrounding them, the arc lamps, and the security cameras—Alex suspected they must be carrying guns. This was a secret world. It wanted to keep its distance from the city outside.

He looked up. The clouds were thick, an ugly shade of gray. He couldn't see the sun, but he could feel it, pressing down on them. Surely it would rain again soon. The entire atmosphere was like a balloon filled with water. At any time it would have to burst.

It was time to go. The white van was there with its engine running. The sliding door was open. Somebody called out to them. Ash took a step forward.

Alex would remember the moment later. It was like a flash photograph...a few seconds caught in time when everything is normal and everyone in the picture is still unaware of the approaching danger. He heard a car approaching the main gate. It occurred to him that the car was being driven far too fast, that it would surely have to slow down so that the gate could be opened. Then the realization came that the car wasn't going to slow down, that the driver didn't need an open gate to enter.

Without any further warning, the gates of the complex were smashed to pieces, one side flying

open, the other hanging drunkenly off its hinges as first one, then a second huge Jeep Cherokee burst through. Each one carried five men who came tumbling out almost before the Jeep had stopped. They were all armed with CZ-Scorpion submachine guns or AK-47 assault rifles. Some also carried knives. They were dressed in combat outfits, and most of them wore red berets, but they didn't look like soldiers. Their hair was too long, and they hadn't shaved. Nobody seemed to be in charge. As they spread out across the yard, waving their weapons from side to side and screaming out orders, Alex was convinced that he had stepped into the middle of an armed robbery and that he was about to witness a shoot-out between different Jakarta gangs.

Everyone in the yard had scattered, trying to reach the safety of the buildings, but Ash had stopped dead. He turned to Alex and muttered a single word. "Kopassus." It meant nothing to Alex. So, making sure nobody could hear him, he added in English: "Indonesian SAS."

He was right.

Kopassus is an abbreviation of *Komando Pasukan Khusus*, and it's the name of one of the most ruthless fighting forces in the world. It is well known—indeed, it is expected—that at least one recruit will die during basic training. After all, they use live ammunition and any injury, even a broken arm or leg, is considered a sign of weakness and will lead to immediate dismissal. In addition to reaching a standard of fitness that is almost superhuman, Kopassus soldiers are expected to acquire a range of specialist skills, including diving, mountaineering, close-quarter combat (CQC), electronic warfare, and at least two foreign languages.

There are five different groups within Kopassus, specializing in sabotage, infiltration, direct action, intelligence, and counterterrorism. The men who had just broken into the compound came from Group 4, also called Sandhi Yudha, a counterintelligence group based in Cijantung in the south of Jakarta with special responsibility for smuggling operations in and out of Jakarta. It might have been luck that had brought them here. Or it could have been the result of a tip-off. But Alex saw that as far as he and Ash were concerned, their work might be over. They'd eventually be able to talk their way out of prison...Ash would only have to prove that he worked for ASIS. But doing so would destroy his cover. They would never find out how the snakehead had planned to get them into Australia. And, Alex reflected bitterly, he would never catch up with the stolen weapon that Mrs. Jones was looking for—Royal Blue.

In other words, he would have failed twice.

But there was nothing he could do. The Kopassus soldiers had taken up positions across the square so that every angle was covered and nobody could move without being seen. They were still shouting in Indonesian. It didn't really matter what they were saying. Their aim was to confuse and intimidate the opposition. And they seemed to have succeeded. The civilians inside the compound were standing helplessly. Some of them had raised their arms. The Kopassus was in control.

They were made to line up. Alex found himself between Ash and one of the men who had first met them when they came from the airport. They were covered by at least half a dozen guns. At the same time, three of the soldiers were searching inside the offices and warehouses, making sure there was nobody hiding. One of the toy workers had decided to do exactly that. Alex heard a scream, then the smash of breaking glass as the unfortunate man was hurled, headfirst, through a window. He came crashing down in the courtyard, blood streaming from his face. Another of the soldiers lashed out with a foot and the man howled, then gathered himself to his feet and limped over to join the line.

One last man had climbed out of the jeep. This was presumably the commanding officer. He was unusually tall for an Indonesian, with a long, slender neck and black hair coming down to his shoulders. Alex heard one of the soldiers refer to him as *kolonel* and guessed that must be his rank. Slowly the colonel made his way along the line, shouting out instructions. He was asking for ID.

One after another the toy workers produced scraps of paper, driver's licenses or work permits. The man who had been thrown out of the window held his up with shaking hands. The colonel didn't seem interested in any of them. Then he reached Ash. Alex tried not to look as Ash took out the fake passport they had been given in Bangkok. He was afraid his eyes might give something away. He glanced down as the colonel opened the passport and held it up to the light. On the edge of his vision, he saw the colonel hesitate. Then suddenly the man struck out, hitting Ash on both sides of the face with the offending document and screaming at him in his own language. Two soldiers appeared from nowhere, pinning Ash's arms behind his back and forcing him down onto his knees. The barrel of a machine gun was pressed into his neck. The colonel handed the passport to one of his subordinates. For a moment he examined Ash's face, gazing into his eyes as if his true identity might be found there. Then he moved on.

He stopped in front of Alex.

Alex looked up. He was scared, and he didn't care if he looked it. Maybe the man would decide that he was just a kid and leave him alone. But the colonel didn't care how old he was. He smelled blood. Something like a smile spread over his face, and he rapped out a sentence in Indonesian, holding out a hand for Alex's ID. Alex froze. He didn't have his own passport. That was in Ash's pocket. But even if he was able to produce it, the colonel would know it was fake. Should he tell the man who he was? Just a few words in English would do the trick. End the danger. End the mission too.

It began to rain.

No. It wasn't quite like that. In London, rain has a beginning, a few drops that send people scattering for cover and allow time for umbrellas to rise. In Jakarta, there was no warning. The rain fell as if a skin had burst. In an instant it was flooding down, warm and solid, an ocean of rain that spluttered out of the drainpipes, hammered against the roofs, and turned the earth to mud.

And with the flood came a brief moment of confusion. Up until then, the Kopassus had been in complete control of the complex, working with a plan that allowed them to cover every inch of ground. The sudden downpour changed things. Alex didn't even see where the gunfire began. But someone must have decided that they had too much to lose and that the rain would give them enough cover to risk shooting their way out of here. There were half a dozen shots. The bullets came from somewhere near the warehouse where Alex had slept, a single gun, fired carefully, at exactly equal intervals. One of the Kopassus men went down, clutching his arm. The rest reacted instantly, diving for cover, returning fire even as they went. The sound of their machine guns was deafening. They didn't seem to care where they were aiming. Alex saw an entire wall ripping itself apart, the wooden planks shredded. A man who had been standing near the door was blown off his feet by the first volley. Alex had seen him just two minutes before, sweeping out the yard.

But the Kopassus were taking casualties too. At least three guns were being fired at them. As Alex turned, searching for cover, the soldier whose gun had been pressed against Ash's neck fell back, a mushroom of blood erupting out of his shoulder. Immediately a second man stepped into his place,

firing in the direction from which the bullets had come, the nozzle of his machine gun flashing white behind the rain.

The colonel had pulled out a pistol, a Swiss-made SIG-Sauer P226 and one of the ugliest nine-millimeter weapons on the market. Alex saw him take aim at Ash. His intention was clear. He had been about to arrest a man and that had provoked a firestorm...at least, that was what he thought. Well, whoever the man was, the colonel wasn't going to let him get away. Rough justice. He would execute him here and now and put an end to all this.

Alex couldn't let it happen. With a cry, he hurled himself sideways, his shoulder slamming into the colonel's stomach. The gun went off, the bullet firing into the air. The two of them flew backward, carried by Alex's velocity, and came crashing down in a puddle. The colonel tried to bring the gun around to aim at Alex. Alex caught hold of his wrist and slammed it down, smashing the back of his hand against a rock. The colonel cried out. Rain was driving into Alex's face, blinding him. He forced the hand up and down a second time. The fingers opened and the gun fell free.

Part of him knew that this was all wrong. He was on the same side as the Kopassus, both of them fighting the snakehead, who were the true enemy. But there was no time to explain. Alex saw a soldier throw something—a round, black object about the size of a baseball—through the deluge. He knew at once what it was, even before the explosion that tore open the side of the warehouse, smashed three windows, and blew a hole in the roof. A tongue of flame leapt up, only to be driven back by the rain.

More gunfire. The man who had thrown the grenade cried out and reeled backward, clutching his shoulder. The white van was moving. Alex heard the engine rev, then saw the van begin a clumsy three-point turn. At the same moment, Ash grabbed hold of his arm. His hair was matted. Water was streaming down his face.

“We have to go!” he shouted. With the noise of the rain and shooting there was no chance of his being overheard.

The colonel lunged sideways and tried to reach the gun. Ash kicked it away, then brought a fist crashing down on the man's head.

“Ash...,” Alex began.

“Later!”

The van had completed its first turn. It was being brought around to face the shattered gate. Ash started forward, and Alex followed. They reached the van just as it began to pick up speed. Ash reached out and wrenched open the back door. The driver wasn't waiting for them. There was a burst of machine-gun fire, and Alex cried out as a line of bullet holes stitched themselves across the side of the van right in front of him.

“Go!” Ash shouted.

Alex threw himself forward, through the door, and into the back of the van. A second later, Ash followed, landing on top of him. The driver didn't even seem to have noticed they were there. All he cared about was getting away himself. One of the side mirrors exploded, the glass shattering, the metal casing tearing free. The engine screamed as the driver pressed his foot on the accelerator. They leapt forward. There was an explosion, so close that Alex felt the flames scorch the side of his face.

But then they were away, shooting out through the gate and into the street beyond.

The van skidded all over the road. It slammed into a wall and one side crumpled, sparks flickering as metal and brick collided. Alex glanced back. One of the van's doors had been blown off, and he saw two soldiers—they looked like ghosts—kneeling in the gate, firing at them. Bullets, burning white, sliced through the rain. But they were already out of range. They hurtled up the track they had come down the night before...by now it was little more than a brown river of mud and debris. Alex looked back, expecting the Kopassus to follow. But the rain was falling so hard that the warehouse complex had already disappeared, and if the two Jeep Cherokees were after them, he wouldn't have been able to tell.

The driver was the same man who had brought them from the airport. He was clutching the steering wheel as if his life depended on it. He looked in the mirror and caught sight of his two unwanted passengers. At once, he let loose a torrent of Indonesian. But he didn't slow down or stop. Alex was relieved. It didn't matter where they were heading. All that mattered was they hadn't been left behind.

"What was that about?" he demanded. His mouth was right next to Ash's ear, and he was confident that the driver wouldn't be able to hear what he said or what language he was speaking.

"I don't know." For once, Ash had lost his composure. He was lying on his side, trying to catch his breath. "It was routine...bad luck. Or maybe someone hadn't paid. It happens all the time in Jakarta."

"Where are we going?"

Ash looked out the back. It was hard to see anything in the half-light and swirling water of the storm, but he must have recognized something. "This is Kota. The old city. We're heading north."

"Is that good?"

"The port is in the north..."

They had joined the morning traffic, and now they were forced to slow down, falling in behind a line of cars and buses. All the food stalls had disappeared beneath a sea of plastic sheeting, and the people were crowded in doorways, squatting under umbrellas, waiting for the storm to pass.

The driver turned around and shouted something. Even if it had been in English, Alex doubted that he would have been able to hear.

"He's taking us to the boat," Ash explained. "He wants us out of here."

"You speak Indonesian?"

Ash nodded. "Enough to understand."

The van emerged from a side street and cut across a main road. Alex saw a taxi swerve to avoid them, its horn blaring. Behind them, an old house loomed out of the rain. It reminded him of something he might have seen in Amsterdam, but then the whole city had belonged to the Dutch once, a far outpost of the East India Company. They crossed a square. It was lined with cobblestones, and lying in the back of the van, Alex felt every one of them. A crowd of bicyclists swerved to avoid them, crashing into one another and tumbling over in a tangle of chains and obscenities. A man pushing a food stall threw himself out of the way with inches to spare.

Then they were on another highway. There was more traffic here—an endless procession of trucks,

each one piled up with goods that were concealed beneath garish plastic tarps. The trucks looked overloaded, as if they might collapse at any time under the weight.

Finally, just ahead, the buildings parted and Alex saw fences, cranes, and ships looming high above them. There were warehouses, guard posts, and offices made of corrugated iron, huge gantries, and great stretches of empty concrete with more trucks and vans making their way back and forth. It was almost impossible to see anything through the endless rain, but this was the port. It had to be. There was a security barrier straight ahead of them and, beyond, a stack of containers behind a barbed wire fence. The van slowed down and stopped. The driver turned around and shouted something in a torrent of Indonesian before stepping out of the van. Then he was gone.

“Ash—” Alex began again.

“This is Tanjung Priok Docks,” Ash cut in. “They must be taking us on a container ship.” He pointed. “You see those fenced-off areas? They’re EPZs. Export Processing Zones. Stuff comes into Jakarta. It gets assembled there, and then it’s shipped out again. That’s our way out of here. Once we’re in an EPZ, we’ll be safe.”

“How do we get in there?” Alex had seen the barriers ahead of them. There were guards on duty, even in the driving rain.

“We pay.” Ash grimaced. “This is Indonesia! The docks are run by the military. But the military are in the pay of the *premens*. You want a translation? They’re gangsters, Alex. The Indonesian mafia. Small beer compared to the snakeheads but still in control around here. You can do anything so long as you pay.” Ash got to one knee and peered out of the window. There was nobody in sight. He glanced back at Alex. “Thank you for what you did back there,” he said.

“I didn’t do anything, Ash.”

“The colonel was about to shoot me. You stopped him.” Ash grimaced. “That’s Kopassus for you. Kill the wrong guy and send flowers to the funeral. Really charming.”

“What happens when we get to Australia?”

“Then it’s over. I get a pat on the back from Ethan Brooke. You go home.”

“Will we see each other again?”

Ash looked away. Like Alex, he was completely drenched, his clothes dripping and forming a pool around him in the back of the van. They both looked like shipwrecks. “Who knows?” he growled. “I haven’t been much of a godfather, have I? Maybe I should have sent you a Bible or something.”

But before Alex could respond, the driver came back, and this time he wasn’t alone. There were three men with him, their faces hidden beneath the hoods of their plastic anoraks. They were all talking at once, jabbing their fingers at Alex and Ash, gesticulating wildly. Slowly their meaning became clear, and Alex felt a chasm open up beneath him. They wanted Alex to come with them. But Ash was to stay behind. The two of them were being separated.

He wanted to cry out, to argue—but even one word would be fatal, and he forced himself to keep his mouth shut. He tried to resist, pulling away from the hands that grabbed at him. It was useless. As he was bundled roughly out of the van, he took one last look at Ash. His godfather was watching him almost sadly, as if he had guessed that something bad was going to happen and knew that he was

powerless to stop it now that it had.

Alex was half dragged onto the road. Ahead of him, a gate had swung open, and he was marched through with a man on each side of him and one ahead. A security guard appeared briefly but the men shouted at him and he quickly turned away.

It was hard to see anything in the driving rain. There was a dock ahead of them and a ship, bigger than any Alex had ever seen, the equivalent of about three soccer fields in length. The ship had a central section where the crew must work and live. Alex could see the bridge, with four or five huge windows and giant windshield wipers swinging back and forth, fighting against the rain. The ship had a name, printed in English along the bow: the *Liberian Star*. It was being loaded with containers, the rectangular boxes dangling from the huge machine known as a spreader, which loomed over them like some sort of monster creature in a science-fiction film. A man in a cabin was controlling the cables and pulleys, lowering each box into place with incredible precision.

They entered the EPZ, where the next containers were waiting their turn, each one painted a different color, some carrying the names of the companies that owned them. Alex saw a yellow box, this one sitting on a truck, and knew that it was his destination. Again, the name was painted in English: Unwin Toys. He looked back, hoping against hope that Ash would be following him after all. But they were alone. Why had the two of them been separated like this? It made no sense. After all, they were supposed to be father and son. He just hoped that Ash would be in a second container and that somehow they would meet up again when they arrived in Darwin. He turned his hand toward himself. The telephone number that Ash had given him had almost vanished, reduced to an inky blur by the constant rain. Fortunately, Alex had committed it to memory, or at least he hoped so. He would know for sure soon enough...if he ever found a phone.

They reached the container, and Alex saw at once that it was locked. More than that, there was a steel pin connected to the door. He was able to guess its purpose. All containers had to be checked by customs officials both going on and coming off a ship. Obviously they couldn't be opened halfway across on their journey or anything—guns, drugs, people—could be added. The steel pin would have a code number that would already have been checked. It would be checked a second time when they arrived in Australia. And if the pin had been tampered with or broken, the entire container would be impounded and examined.

So how was he expected to get in? Alex could see that this was how he was going to travel. Presumably it was too dangerous for him to have a cabin on board the ship, and anyway, as far as the snakehead was concerned, this was all he was: cargo, to be dumped along with all the other merchandise. The man who had been leading the way turned and put a hand on his shoulder, urging him to get down. Alex realized that he was expected to climb underneath the truck, between the wheels.

A moment later he saw why. The container had a secret entrance, a trapdoor that was open, hanging down. He could climb in without touching the main door or the pin that secured it, and once the container was in place, part of a tower with dozens more on top and underneath, there would be no way that anyone could examine it. The whole thing was simple and effective, and part of him even admired the snakehead. It was certainly a huge business, operating in at least three countries. Ethan Brooke had been right. These people were much more than simple criminals.

He crouched under the truck. Immediately he felt claustrophobic. It wasn't just the weight of the

container pressing down on him. He could see that the trapdoor would be locked from the outside. There was a single solid bolt that slid across. Once that happened, he would be trapped. If the ship sank or if they simply decided to drop the whole thing overboard, he would drown in his own oversized metal coffin. He hesitated, and at once the man jabbed him between the shoulders, urging him forward.

Alex turned, pretending to be scared, pleading with his eyes to be reunited with Ash. But how could he make himself understood when he couldn't utter a single word? One of the other men thrust something into his hands: a plastic bag with two bottles of water and a loaf of bread. Supplies for the long journey ahead. The first man pushed him again and shouted. Alex couldn't delay any longer. He crawled under the truck and over to the trapdoor. The men gestured and he pulled himself up. But as he went, he stumbled. One of his hands caught hold of the sliding bolt and he steadied himself.

That was his last sight of Indonesia. Mud, dripping rain, and the undercarriage of a truck. He pulled himself into the container, and seconds later the trapdoor slammed shut behind him. He heard the bolt slide across with a loud clang. Now there was no way out.

It was only as he straightened up that he realized he could see. There was light inside the container. He looked around. Two dozen anxious faces stared at him.

It seemed he wasn't going to make this part of the journey alone.

THE LIBERIAN STAR

IN FACT, THERE WERE twenty people inside the container, huddled together in the half-light thrown by a single battery-operated light. Alex knew at once that they were refugees. He could tell from their faces: not just foreign but afraid, far removed from their own world. Most of them were men, but there were also women and children...a couple of them as young as seven or eight. Alex remembered what Ethan Brooke had told him about illegal immigrants when he was in Sydney. "Half of them are under the age of eighteen." Well, here was the proof of it. There were whole families locked together in this metal box, hoping and praying that they would arrive safely in Australia. But they were powerless, and they knew it, utterly dependent on the good will of the snakehead. No wonder they looked nervous.

A gaunt, gray-haired man, wearing a loose, dark yellow colored shirt and baggy pants, made his way forward. Alex guessed he must be in his sixties. He might once have been a farmer. His hands were coarse, and his face had been burned dry by the sun. He muttered a few words to Alex. He could have been speaking any language—Dari, Hazaragi, Kurdish, or Arabic—it would have made no difference. Alex knew that without Ash, he was exposed. He had no way of communicating and nobody to hide behind. What would these people do if they discovered that he was an imposter? He hoped he wouldn't have to find out.

The man realized that Alex hadn't understood him. He tapped his chest and spoke a single word. "Salem." That was presumably his name.

He waited for Alex to reply, and when none came, he turned to a woman, who came forward and tried a second language. Alex turned away and sat in a corner. Let them think he was shy or unfriendly. He didn't care. He wasn't here to make friends.

Alex drew his legs toward his chest and buried his face against his knees. He needed to think. Why had he been separated from Ash? Had the snakehead somehow found out that the two of them were working for ASIS? All in all, he doubted it. If the snakehead even suspected who they were, they would have dragged them out together and shot them. There had to be another reason for the last-minute decision at the harbor but try as he might, Alex couldn't work out what it was.

There was a sudden jolt. The whole container shook, and one of the children began to cry. The other refugees drew closer together and stared around them as if they could somehow see through the flat metal walls. Alex knew what had happened. One of the huge machines—the spreaders—had picked them up, lifting them off the truck and loading them onto the *Liberian Star*. Right now, they could be fifty yards above the dock, dangling on four thin wires. Nobody was moving, afraid of upsetting the balance. Alex thought he heard the hum of machinery somewhere above his head. There was a second jolt and the electric light flickered. And that was a horrible thought. Suppose it went out! Could they endure the entire journey in pitch darkness? The container was swaying very slightly. Somebody shouted, a long way away. They began the journey down.

Alex hadn't been able to see very much of the *Liberian Star* in the rain and the confusion of their arrival, but he had taken in the metal boxes piled up on great blocks, one on top of the other, separated by a space that couldn't have measured more than a couple of feet. Where would they end

up? On top, in the middle, or buried somewhere deep in the hold? He had to fight back a growing sense of claustrophobia. There were no holes drilled in the walls. The only air would come in through the cracks around the door and the secret trapdoor. The container had already reminded Alex of a coffin. Now he felt as if he and the twenty other occupants were about to be buried alive.

They came to a halt. Something clanged against the outer wall. Two of the children whimpered, and Salem went over to them, putting his arms around their shoulders and holding them close. Alex took a deep breath. There could be no going back now—that much was certain. They were on board.

And what next? Ash had said it would take them forty-eight hours to reach northern Australia, and by the time they had waited to be unloaded, it could be as much as three or four days. Alex wasn't sure he could bear to sit in here all that time, locked up with these strangers. He had only the two bottles of water and the bread that he had been given at the last moment. He hoped the other refugees had brought their own supplies. There was a chemical toilet in the far corner, but Alex knew that conditions inside the container would soon become disgusting. For the first time, he understood how desperate these people must be even to dream of making such a journey.

For his own part, he knew he couldn't just sit here. He was worried about Ash—and he was going to learn nothing about the snakehead, locked up in the dark. Of course, there was always the watch that Smithers had given him. But despite everything, there was no real reason to send out a distress signal. There was still a chance that Ash was somewhere on board the *Liberian Star*. Alex was just going to have to find him.

He had made up his mind. There was nothing he could do until the ship had left Jakarta, but once they were at sea, there was every chance that the container would be unguarded. Why bother when there was no chance of escape? Alex closed his eyes and tried to sleep. He needed to gather his strength. He wasn't going to use the watch, but there was another gadget Smithers had given him. Alex had already slipped it into position. When the time was right, Alex would use it to break out.

He waited until they were halfway across before he made his move.

At least twenty-four hours had passed, night blending into day with no difference between the two inside this blank, airless box. The smell was getting worse and worse. At least no one had been seasick, but the chemical toilet was barely adequate for so many people. Nobody was talking. What was there to say? In a way, the crossing had become a sort of living death.

Alex had caught up on the sleep he'd missed at Jakarta, although he'd had bad dreams...Ash, Thai boxing, sardines! Now he'd had enough.

He dug into his pocket and took out the pack of chewing gum, then slid open the panel in the side. He had to hold it against the light to see properly, but there were the three numbers: 1, 5, and 10, each with its own switch.

The five-baht coin was already in position. When Alex had climbed into the container, he had pretended to stumble, and as he reached out to steady himself, he had slipped it behind the sliding bolt. As long as none of the snakehead members had seen it, it was still there, magnetically held in place underneath him. Now was the time to find out. He would just have to hope that the noise of the engines and the sea swell would cover any sound made by the explosion.

He went over to the trapdoor and knelt beside it. He couldn't hear anything outside, but that was hardly surprising. The other refugees were looking at him, wondering what he was doing. There was no point in waiting any longer. Alex pressed the switch marked 5.

There was a sharp crack underneath the trapdoor, and a wisp of acrid smoke rose up inside the container. One of the women began to gabble at Alex, but he ignored her. He pressed down with one hand, and to his relief, the trapdoor fell open, forming a small chute that angled into the darkness between the two blocks. The bolt had snapped in half. There was just enough room for Alex to slither out—but into what? It was always possible that he would find himself in the very depths of the hold, hemmed in on all sides, with nowhere else to go.

He had caused a minor panic inside the container. Everyone was talking at once, at least half a dozen languages fighting with one another all around him. Salem came over to him and tugged at his shirt, pleading with him not to do whatever it was he had planned. He looked bewildered. Who was this boy, traveling on his own, who had dared to antagonize the snakehead by attempting to leave without their permission? And how had he done it? They had heard the bolt shatter, but that was all. It seemed to have happened by magic.

Alex looked Salem in the eyes and pressed a finger against his lips. He was pleading with the old man to be silent and not to let the others give him away. It was the most he could hope for. These people were here to make a journey. He had nothing to do with them. With a bit of luck, none of them would try to follow him out or, worse still, tell the ship's crew what had happened. But if he waited any longer, one of them might try to stop him. It was time to go.

Still not sure what he was letting himself in for, Alex slid through the trapdoor headfirst, easing himself into the black square that had opened up below. It was much cooler outside. He had been sharing the same air with twenty people for an entire day and night, and he had been unaware how stifling it had become. It was noisier too. He could hear the hum of the ship's engines, the grinding of machinery in constant motion.

But at least there was a way out. Alex found himself in what was effectively a long, flat tunnel. The containers were piled up on top of him, and he could feel their huge weight pressing down. But there was a crawl space about half a yard high between the floor above him and the ceiling of the container below. He could see the daylight bleeding in—a narrow strip like a crack in a brick wall. Using his knees and elbows, he pushed himself toward it. It was a painful process, constantly scraping his legs and banging his shoulders on the rusty metal above and below him.

At last he reached the edge, only to find himself high above the deck, caught three stories up a tower of containers with no obvious way to climb down. Alex could see the ocean rushing past on the other side of the ship. There was no sign of land. For a moment he was tempted to crawl back inside. He had nowhere to run. Swimming was out of the question. He would be safer back with Salem and the others.

And was there really any chance of finding Ash? The *Liberian Star* was huge. It probably held a thousand containers. Ash could be stuck in any one of them, locked up with his own crowd of refugees. Alex had never felt so helpless. But going back would be admitting defeat. Ever since he had first encountered the snakehead in Bangkok, he had allowed them to push him around. He'd had enough. It was time to fight back.

He had come out at one of the long sides of the container, with a sheer drop to the deck below. There was no way down, so he crawled all the way along the edge and over to the front. He had more luck here. The container doors were fastened with long steel rods that formed a climbing frame, and there were the metal security pins and locks that would provide perfect footholds. Alex knew he had to move quickly. It was still light—he guessed it must be late afternoon—and he would be seen by anyone who happened to appear on deck. On the other hand, he would have to be careful. If he slipped, there was a long way to fall.

Holding on to one of the bars, he squeezed himself out and then began the journey down, trying to ignore the sea spray that whipped into his back and made every surface slippery. His worst fear was that a crew member would come out, and despite the danger, he forced himself to move faster, finally dropping the last few yards and crashing down onto the deck, anxious to get himself out of sight. Nobody had seen him. He looked back up, checking the position of the container just in case he needed to return. There was the name, Unwin Toys, in great white letters. Alex thought about the secret it concealed. He had to admit that he had never come across a criminal organization—or a crime—quite like this.

He looked around. It was only now, crouching in the open air, that he realized quite how enormous the *Liberian Star* actually was. It measured at least three hundred yards in length, and it must have been about fifty yards across. The containers were piled up like metal office blocks, surrounded by decks, gantries, and ladders that would allow the crew to scurry around in what little space was left. Alex was at the back of the ship, where the huge anchor chains disappeared into a cavity below. In front of him, the bridge rose up, the eyes and brain of the entire ship. Behind him, the water boiled, churned up by the propellers below. He guessed they must be traveling at about thirty-five knots, or thirty miles per hour.

He had already accepted the fact that he had no hope at all of finding Ash. But now that he was out, he decided to explore. They could only be about twenty-four hours from Darwin. If he could survive that long without being seen, he might be able to get off the ship and find a telephone. The number that Ash had given him had completely vanished from the back of his hand. He just hoped that he had remembered it correctly and that Ash would still be able to take his call.

In the next couple of hours, Alex explored a large part of the ship. He quickly realized that despite their great size, container ships are almost entirely made up of containers and that their layout is actually very simple, with two decks running all the way from fore to aft and only a limited area for the crew to live and work. And the crew is actually surprisingly small. Only once did he spot a couple of crewmen—Filipinos in blue overalls, leaning against a handrail, smoking cigarettes. Alex slipped behind a ventilation shaft and waited until they left. That was something else to his advantage in this strange, entirely metal world. There were a thousand places to hide.

It was more dangerous inside, where the clean, brightly lit passageways were lined with dozens of doors, any one of which could open at any time. Alex was looking for the food store—he was hungry—but just as he came upon it, another crewman appeared, and he had to duck down the nearest stairway to get out of sight. The stairs led to a cargo hold. As he waited for the man to disappear, Alex heard voices...two men talking. They were speaking in English. Intrigued, he continued down.

He came to a platform perched on the edge of an area that was like an oversized metal cube, with sheer walls rising to the deck above. A single container had been stored here. It was also marked

Unwin Toys and was locked with the same security pin as the others. Four men were standing in a semicircle, deep in conversation. One of them was obviously in charge. He was standing with his back to Alex, and from his position high above, all Alex could make out was a thin, rather frail-looking body and strange white hair. The man was leaning on a walking stick. He was wearing gray gloves.

Alex assumed they were going to unlock the container, but what happened next took him completely by surprise. One of the men lifted something that looked like a television remote control and pressed a button. Immediately one side of the container opened electronically, the sections separating like elevator doors. There was a click, and then the floor of the container slid forward, bringing the contents out where they could be examined. What a box of tricks! The security pin was still in place and wouldn't need to be touched.

Alex knew at once what he was looking at. There could be no mistaking it. Royal Blue. That was the name that Mrs. Jones had given it. She had told him it was the most powerful non-nuclear weapon on the planet. Alex's first impression was that the bomb was strangely old-fashioned, like something out of World War II. In the great emptiness of the hold, it looked small, but he guessed that it was about the size of a family car. He wondered what it was doing out here—and where were they taking it? Australia? Was the white-haired man planning to set it off there?

Right now, it was surrounded by a bank of machinery, and as soon as the container had clicked into position, two of the men set to work connecting it all up. There was some sort of scanner—it looked like an office photocopier—and a laptop computer. A third man was explaining something. He was black, with a pockmarked face, very white teeth, and cheap plastic glasses that were too heavy for his face. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt with half a dozen pens in the breast pocket. Alex edged forward to hear what he was saying.

“...We had to modify the bomb to change the method of detonation.” The man had an accent that Alex couldn't quite place—French, perhaps. “It would normally explode one yard above the ground. But this one will be required to explode one-half mile below it. So we have made the necessary adaptations...”

“A radio signal?” the white-haired man asked.

“Yes, sir.” The tall man indicated a piece of equipment. “This is how you communicate with the bomb. The timing is crucial. I estimate that Royal Blue will only be able to function at that depth for around twenty minutes. You must send the signal during that time.”

“I want to be the one who sends the signal,” the white-haired man said. He spoke perfect English, like an old-fashioned news broadcaster.

“Of course, sir. I received your e-mail from London. And as you can see, I've arranged a fairly simple device. It allows you to scan your fingerprints into the system. From that moment on, you will have complete control.”

“That's absolutely first rate. Thank you, Mr. Varga.”

The white-haired man pulled off one of his gloves, revealing a hand that was small and withered. It could have belonged to someone who was dead. Alex watched as he placed it against the scanner. Mr. Varga pressed a few buttons on the laptop. A green bar of light appeared underneath the hand, traveling across the palm. It only took a couple of seconds, and then it was over.

One of the other men was overweight, with thinning ginger hair. He was about fifty years old, dressed in a white shirt and pants with blue and gold bands on his shoulders. The white-haired man now turned to him.

“You can put Royal Blue back into the container, Captain De Wynter,” he said. “It’ll be unloaded the moment we arrive at East Arm.”

“Yes, Major.”

“And one other thing...”

But the white-haired man—the major—never finished the sentence. There was a scream from a siren, so loud that Alex was almost knocked off the platform and had to cover his ears to protect himself from the noise. It was an alarm signal. The fourth man, who had so far said nothing, swung around, revealing a machine gun—a lightweight Belgian M249—hanging at his waist. Captain De Wynter pulled out a cell phone and speed dialed.

The siren stopped. The captain listened for a few seconds, then reported what he had heard, speaking in a low voice. Half deafened, Alex couldn’t hear a word he said.

The white-haired man shook his head angrily. “Who is he? Where did he come from?”

“They are holding him on the deck,” De Wynter replied.

“I want to see him for myself,” the white-haired man exclaimed. “Come with me!”

The four of them left together, making for a door set in the side of the hold. A moment later they were gone, and to his astonishment, Alex found himself alone with the bomb. It seemed to be a heaven-sent opportunity, and without even hesitating, he climbed down the staircase and went over to the container. And there it was right in front of him. MI6 was searching for Royal Blue all over Thailand, but he had found it in the middle of the South China Sea. He had found Winston Yu at the same time—for that was surely who the white-haired man must be. After all, he had just heard the captain refer to him as “Major.” But why were they both here? What did the major want with the bomb? Alex wished he had heard more.

He ran his eyes over it. Close up, it struck him as one of the ugliest things he had ever seen—blunt and heavy, built only to kill and destroy. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if he could detonate it. That would put an end to Yu’s plans, whatever they were. But Alex had no wish to die, and anyway, there were at least twenty refugees, some of them children, concealed in the ship. They’d be killed too.

Perhaps he could disarm it. But there was no point. Yu or the man called Varga would soon see what he had done and simply reverse it. Could he use another of the exploding coins? No—they might be able to penetrate the thick shell of Royal Blue, but what then? And anything he damaged, Yu could easily replace.

He had to do something. The four men might be back at any time. He glanced at the laptop, and that was when he saw the instruction, printed in capital letters on the screen.

>PLACE HAND ON SCREEN

The laptop was connected to the scanner. Alex could see the outline of a human hand, positioned exactly to read the user’s fingertips. Acting on impulse, he placed his own hand on the glass surface.

There was a click, and the green light rolled underneath his palm. On the laptop, the readout changed.

>FINGERPRINT PROFILE ACCEPTED

>Add further authorization Y/N?

>Delete previous authorization Y/N?

Alex reached out and pressed Y for the first instruction and N for the second. There was no point in advertising that he had been here. The screen returned to its first message.

>PLACE HAND ON SCREEN

So that was interesting. He had given himself the power to override the system if he ever happened to come across it again—and with a bit of luck, neither Major Yu nor Mr. Varga would notice.

There was nothing more to be done here. Alex made his way back to the staircase and went up, intending to find somewhere to hide. He would wait until he got to Darwin. Then he would contact Mrs. Jones and tell her about her precious bomb. If she asked him nicely, he could even defuse it for her.

He reached the deck. Major Yu had arrived there ahead of him—Alex could hear his voice although he couldn't make out any of the words. Quickly he climbed a ladder that led to a narrow passageway dividing two of the container towers. There was no chance of anyone spotting him here. Feeling bolder, he made his way to the end and found himself looking down on the foredeck, where a single mast rose up amid a tangle of winches and cables.

What he saw there chilled him.

He had thought the siren was a useful diversion, perhaps announcing some problem in the engine room. It had gotten Major Yu and his men out of the way at exactly the right moment. But now he realized that it hadn't been good news at all. In fact, it could hardly be worse.

The old man from the container—Salem—had decided to follow Alex out. He must have squeezed through the trapdoor and found his way onto the deck. But there his luck had run out. A couple of the crewmen had discovered him. They were holding him now with his hands pinned behind his back while Major Yu questioned him. Captain De Wynter and Mr. Varga were watching. Salem was having difficulty making himself understood. He had been beaten. One of his eyes was swollen half shut, and there was blood trickling from a cut on his cheek.

He finished speaking, a gabble of words that were swept away by the wind. It wasn't cold out on the deck, but Alex found himself shivering. Major Yu still had his back to him. Alex watched as he carefully removed one of his gloves and reached into his jacket pocket. He took out a small pistol. Without hesitating, without even pausing to aim, he shot the old man between the eyes. The single report of the bullet was like a crack of wood. Salem died on his feet, still held up by the two crewmen. Yu nodded and the men tilted him backward, tipping his lifeless body over the rails. Alex saw it fall into the water and disappear.

Then Major Yu spoke again, and somehow his words carried up as if amplified.

“There is a child on this ship,” he exclaimed. “He has escaped from the container. I don't know how. He must be found immediately and killed. Bring the dead body to me.”

HIDE-AND-SEEK

THE CAPTAIN OF THE *Liberian Star* was not normally a nervous man, but right now he was sweating. Standing in front of the stateroom door, he tried to compose himself, mopping his forehead and tucking his cap under his arm. He was aware that he might have only a few minutes to live.

Hermann de Wynter was Dutch, unmarried, out of shape, and saving money for a retirement somewhere in the sun. He had been working for the snakehead for eleven years, transporting containers all over the world. Never once had he asked what was inside. He knew that in this game, the wrong question could prove fatal. So could failure. And now it was his duty to tell Major Yu that he had failed.

He took a breath and knocked on the door of the stateroom that Yu occupied, on the same level as the main deck.

“Come!”

The single word sounded cheerful enough, but De Wynter had been present the day before. Yu had smiled as he killed the Afghan refugee.

He opened the door and went in. The room was well appointed, with a thick carpet, modern English furniture, and soft lighting. Yu was sitting at a table, drinking a cup of tea. There was also a plate of shortbread, which De Wynter knew was organic and came from Highgrove, the estate belonging to the Prince of Wales.

“Good morning, Captain.” Yu motioned for him to come in. “What news do you have for me?”

De Wynter had to force the words into his mouth. “I am very sorry to have to report, Major Yu, that we have been unable to find the boy.”

Yu looked surprised. “You’ve been working for eighteen hours.”

“Yes, sir. None of the crew has slept. We spent the whole night searching the ship from top to bottom. Frankly, it’s incredible that we have found no trace of him. We’ve used motion detectors and sonic intensifiers. Nothing! Some of the men think the child must have slipped overboard. Of course, we still haven’t given up...”

His voice trailed off. There was nothing more to say, and he knew that making too many excuses would annoy Major Yu all the more. De Wynter stood there, waiting for whatever might come. He had once seen Yu shoot a man simply for being late with his tea. He just hoped his own end would be as quick.

But to his amazement, Major Yu smiled pleasantly. “The boy certainly is trouble,” he admitted. “Frankly, I’m not at all surprised that he’s managed to give you the slip. He’s quite a character.”

De Wynter blinked. “You know him?” he asked.

“Oh yes. Our paths have already crossed once before.”

“But I thought...” De Wynter frowned. “He’s just a refugee! A street urchin out of Afghanistan.”

“Not at all, Captain. That’s what he’d like us to believe. But the truth is that he’s quite unique. His name is Alex Rider. He works for British intelligence. He’s what you might call a teenage spy.”

De Wynter sat down. This was in itself remarkable. After all, Major Yu hadn’t offered him a seat.

“Forgive me, sir,” he began. “But are you saying that the British managed to get a spy on board? A child...?”

“Exactly.”

“And you knew?”

“I know everything, Captain De Wynter.”

“But...why?” De Wynter had completely forgotten his earlier fear. Somewhere in the back of his mind, it occurred to him that he had never spoken to Major Yu so familiarly or for such a length of time.

“It amused me,” Yu replied. “This boy is rather full of himself. He travels to Bangkok disguised as a refugee. His mission is to infiltrate my snakehead. But all along, I know who he is and I am simply choosing the moment when I will bring his young life to a fitting end. I have friends who would like me to do it sooner rather than later. But the time is my choice.”

Yu poured himself some more tea. He picked up a shortbread cookie, holding it between his gloved fingers, and dipped it into the cup.

“My intention was to allow him to travel as far as Darwin,” he continued. “As it happens, I have a use for him, and he might as well travel with the other refugees as anywhere else. Unfortunately, the old man was unable to tell me how he managed to break out of the container, and it’s certainly an unwelcome surprise. But I am still confident that you will be able to locate him eventually. After all, we have plenty of time.”

The Dutchman felt his mouth go dry again. “I’m afraid not, sir,” he muttered. “In fact, it may already be too late.”

“Why is that?” Major Yu’s eyebrows rose behind the round wire frames.

“Look out of the window, sir. We’ve arrived at Darwin. They’ve already sent out a couple of tugs to tow us in.”

“Surely we can delay docking for a few more hours.”

“No, sir. If we do that, we could be stuck here for a week.” De Wynter ran a hand over his jaw. “The Australian ports run like clockwork,” he explained. “Everything has to be very precise. We have an allocated time for arrival, and it’s a small window. If we miss it, another ship will take our place.”

Yu considered. Something very close to anxiety appeared in his shrunken schoolboy face. This was exactly what Zeljan Kurst had warned him about in London. Like it or not, Alex Rider had taken on Scorpia once before and beaten them. Yu had thought it impossible that such a thing could happen a second time. And yet the boy did seem to have the luck of the devil. How had he managed to get out of the container? It was a shame nobody had been able to understand the old man before he had died.

“Even if we dock, the boy cannot possibly leave the ship,” De Wynter said. “There is only one exit—the main gangway, and that will be guarded at all times. He can jump into the sea, but I will have men on lookout. We can cover every angle with rifles. We’ll pick him off in the water. A single shot. No one will hear anything. We’ll only be in Darwin for a few hours. Our next port is Rio de Janeiro. We’ll have three weeks to flush him out.”

Major Yu nodded slowly. Even as De Wynter had been speaking, he had made up his mind. In truth, he had little choice. Royal Blue had to be unloaded immediately in order to continue its journey. He couldn’t wait. On the other hand, there was something that Alex Rider didn’t know. Whatever happened, all the cards were in Yu’s hand.

“Very well, Captain,” he muttered. “We’ll tie up at Darwin. But if the boy does slip through your fingers a second time, I suggest you kill yourself.” He snapped a cookie in half. “It will spare me the trouble, and it will, I assure you, cause you a great deal less pain.”

Alex Rider had heard everything that Major Yu had said.

The man who sat on the executive board of Scorpia and who headed the most powerful snakehead in south-east Asia would have been horrified to know that Alex was hiding in perhaps the most obvious place in the world. Under his own bed.

Alex had known what he was up against. The moment he had seen the refugee killed on the deck and had heard Yu give the order for the crew to hunt him down, he had realized he needed to find somewhere on the ship that nobody would even dream of looking. It was true there were hundreds of hiding places—ventilation shafts, the crawl spaces between the containers, cabins, cable housings, and storage units. But none of these would be good enough, not with the entire crew searching for him non-stop throughout the night.

No—it had to be somewhere completely unthinkable...and the idea had come to him almost at once. Where was the last place he would go? It had to be the captain’s cabin or better still, Major Yu’s own quarters on board the *Liberian Star*. The crew almost certainly weren’t allowed in either. It wouldn’t even occur to them to look inside.

He’d only been given a few minutes’ start. As the crew members organized themselves and the various listening devices were handed out, Alex was racing. The layout of the ship was fairly easy to understand. He had seen much of it already. The engine rooms and the crew’s cabins were somewhere down below. Yu, the captain, and the senior officers—anyone important—would surely be housed above sea level, somewhere in the central block.

Breathless, imagining the crewmen fanning out behind him, Alex stumbled on a door that led to the spotlessly clean, brightly lit corridor that he had explored the day before. He was on the right track. The first door he came to opened into a conference room, full of charts and computers. Next came a living space with a bar and TV. He heard the clatter of saucepans and ducked back as a man wearing a chef’s hat suddenly crossed the corridor and disappeared into a room opposite. A moment later, he emerged again and went back the way he had come, carrying a box of canned food.

Alex hurried forward. The chef had clearly entered some sort of larder, and Alex wasted a few seconds pulling out a bottle of water for himself. He was going to need it. Continuing down the corridor, he passed a laundry, a game room, and a miniature hospital. He came to an elevator and was

tempted to take it. According to the display, there were six floors above him. But he didn't have time and dreaded waiting for it to arrive, only to find it packed with Yu's men.

He came upon Yu's stateroom at the very end of the corridor. It wasn't locked—but there wasn't a man on board the *Liberian Star* who would have dared enter even if the door had been open and Yu miles away. Alex slipped inside. He saw a table with a number of files and documents spread across the surface and wished he had time to examine them. What secrets they might reveal! But he didn't dare touch anything. Moving even one page a fraction of an inch might give him away.

He looked around him, taking in the pictures on the walls—scenes of the English countryside with, in one image, a traditional hunt setting out across what might be Salisbury Plain. A sophisticated stereo system and a plasma TV. A leather sofa. This was where Yu worked and relaxed when he was on board.

The bedroom was next door. Here was another bizarre touch. Yu slept in an antique four-poster bed. But Alex knew at once that it was perfect for his needs. There was a silk valance that trailed down to the floor, and lifting it up, Alex saw a space half a yard high that would conceal him perfectly. God—it reminded him of being six years old again, playing hide-and-seek with Jack Starbright on Christmas Eve. But this wasn't the same. This time he was on a container ship, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, surrounded by people who were determined to kill him.

Same game. Different rules.

Alex took a swig of the water he had stolen and slid underneath, easing the silk valance back into shape. Very little light bled through underneath. Alex prepared himself, trying to find a comfortable position. He knew that he wouldn't be able to move a muscle once Yu entered the room.

He was suddenly struck by the craziness of his plan. Could he really stay here all night? How stupid would he look if Yu found him? He was briefly tempted to crawl out and find somewhere else. But it was already too late. The search would have begun, and he couldn't risk starting again.

In fact, it was several hours before Yu came in. Alex heard the outer door open and close again. Footsteps. Then music. Yu had turned on the stereo system. His taste was classical...Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, the music they played at the Albert Hall in London every summer. He listened to the piece while he ate his dinner. Alex heard one of the stewards deliver it to him and caught a faint scent of roast meat. The smell made him hungry. He sipped a little more water, glumly reflecting that it was all he had to last the night.

Later Yu turned on the television. Somehow he had managed to tune in to the BBC, and Alex heard the late-night news.

“Pop singer Rob Goldman was in Australia this week, just five days before the conference taking place on Reef Island, which has come to be known as Reef Encounter and which has been timed to take place at exactly the same time as the G8 summit in Rome.

“Goldman played to a sold-out audience at the Sydney Opera House and told an enthusiastic crowd that peace and an end to world poverty were possible—but that they would have to be achieved by people, not politicians.

“Speaking from 10 Downing Street, the British prime minister said that he wished Sir Rob every success but insisted that the real work would be done in Rome. It's a view that not many people seem

to share...”

Much later, Major Yu went to bed. Alex barely breathed as he came into the bedroom. Lying in the semi-darkness with muscles that were already aching, he heard the major undress and wash in the adjoining bathroom. And then came the inevitable moment: the creak of wood and shifting metal springs as Yu climbed into bed, just inches above the boy he was so determined to find. Fortunately, he didn't read before he slept. Alex heard the click of the light switch, and the last glimmer of light was extinguished. Then everything was silent.

For Alex, the night was yet another long, dreary ordeal. He was fairly sure that Major Yu was asleep, but he couldn't be certain, and he didn't dare sleep himself in case the sound of his breathing or an accidental movement gave him away. All he could do was wait, listening to the hum of the engines and feeling the pitch of the ship as they drew ever closer to Australia. At least that was one consolation. Every second that he remained undiscovered brought him a little closer to safety.

But how was he to get off the *Liberian Star*? One exit—guarded. The decks watched. Alex didn't like the idea of diving overboard and swimming...even assuming he could manage it without being crushed or drowned. And there would be a dozen or more men waiting to take a potshot at him. Well, he would just have to worry about that when the time came.

The ship plowed on through the darkness. The minutes dragged slowly past. At last a glimmer of light crept across the floor, pushing away the shadows of the night.

Yu woke up, washed, dressed, and took his breakfast in the stateroom. That was the worst part for Alex. He had barely moved for ten hours, and all his bones were aching. Still Yu refused to leave. He was working at his desk. Alex heard the rustle of pages turning and, briefly, the rattle of computer keys. And then the steward brought a mid-morning snack, and a short while later De Wynter arrived with the news of his failure.

So Major Yu knew who he was—and had known from the start! Alex tucked that information away, hoping he would be able to make sense of it later. For now, all that mattered was that his plan had worked and the long hours of discomfort had been worth it. They were docking at Darwin. Surely any minute now, Yu would go out on deck to see dry land.

But it was another two hours before he left. Alex waited until he was quite sure that he was alone, then rolled out from underneath the bed. He glanced into the stateroom. Yu had gone, but he had left some of the cookies, and Alex wolfed them down. Yu might notice—but Alex was too hungry to care. At the same time, he tried to ease some feeling back into his muscles. He had to prepare himself. He knew that he had just one chance to get away. They would set off to sea again in just a few hours' time, and if he was still on board, he would be finished.

He went over to the window. The *Liberian Star* had already berthed at the section of the port of Darwin known as the East Arm Wharf. To his dismay, Alex realized that they were still a very long way from land. The East Arm was an artificial cement causeway stretching far out into the ocean, with the usual array of gantries, cranes, and spreaders waiting to receive the ships. It was a world apart from the docks at Jakarta. Quite apart from the blinding Australian sun, everything seemed very clean and ordered. There were two long rows of parked cars and beyond them, a neat, modern warehouse and some gas tanks—all of them painted white.

A van drove past, heading up the dock. Two men walked past in fluorescent jackets and hard hats.

Even assuming Alex could get off the ship, he still wouldn't be safe. It was at least a mile to the mainland, and presumably there would be security barriers at the far end. At least Yu wouldn't dare gun him down in plain sight. That was one consolation. But however Alex looked at it, this wasn't going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Even so, he couldn't wait any longer.

Alex crept over to the door and opened it an inch at a time. The corridor was empty, lit by the same hard light that made it impossible to tell if it was night or day. He had already worked out a strategy based on what he had overheard in the cabin. Everyone was waiting for him to break out. That meant their attention would be fixed on the main gangplank and the decks. So the rest of the ship was his. Right now he needed a diversion. He set out to create one.

He hurried past the elevator and found a staircase leading down. He could hear a deep throbbing coming from below and guessed that he was heading the right way—to the engine room. He came upon it quite suddenly, a strangely old-fashioned tangle of brass valves and silver pipes and pistons, all connected to one another in a steel framework like an exhibition in an industrial museum. The air was hot down here. There was no natural light. The machinery seemed to stretch on for a mile, and Alex could imagine that a ship the size of the *Liberian Star* would need every inch of it.

The control room was raised slightly above the engines, separated from them by three thick glass observation windows and reached by a short flight of metal stairs. Alex crept up on his hands and feet and found himself looking at a much more modern room with rows of gauges and dials, TV screens, computers, and intricate switchboards. A single man sat in a high-backed chair, tapping at a keyboard. He looked half asleep. Certainly he wasn't expecting trouble down here.

Alex saw what he was looking for: a metal cabinet about fifteen yards high with thick pipes leading in and out and a warning sign.

AIR SUPPLY

DANGER: DO NOT CUT OFF

He didn't know what needed the air or what would happen if it didn't get it, but the bright red letters were irresistible. He was going to find out.

He reached into his pocket and took out the one-baht coin that Smithers had given him. Using it would mean he would only have the ten-baht coin left. With a bit of luck, he wouldn't be needing it. Alex watched the man in the chair for a minute, then slipped into the control room and placed the coin against the pipe just where it entered the cabinet. The man didn't look up. The coin clicked into place, activating the charge inside. Alex tiptoed out again.

He found the chewing gum pack, slid the side open, and pressed the switch marked 1. The bang was very loud and, to his surprise and delight, highly destructive. The explosion not only tore open the pipe, it wrecked the electrical circuits inside the cabinet too. There was a series of brilliant sparks. Something like white steam gushed out into the control room. The man leapt up. Another alarm had gone off, and red lights were flashing all around him. Alex didn't wait to see what would happen next. He was already on his way out.

Down the stairs, past the engines, and back up again. This time he took the elevator, guessing that in an emergency, the crew would be more likely to use the stairs. He pressed the button for the sixth floor, and the elevator slid smoothly up.

He knew where he was heading. He had seen the bridge when he was being loaded into the container at Jakarta and had noticed that it had its own deck, a sort of balcony with a railing and a view over the entire ship. This was going to be his way off the *Liberian Star*. For—once again—Yu’s guns might be pointing everywhere, but surely they wouldn’t be pointing here.

The elevator reached the sixth floor and the doors slid open. To Alex’s dismay, he found himself facing a squat Chinese crewman who had been waiting to come down. The man was even more shocked than Alex and reacted clumsily, scrambling for the gun that was tucked into the waistband of his pants. That was a mistake. Alex didn’t give him time to draw it, lashing out with the point of his foot, aiming straight between the man’s legs. It wasn’t so much a karate strike, more an old-fashioned kick in the balls, but it did the trick. The Chinaman gurgled and collapsed, dropping the gun. Alex scooped it up and continued on his way.

And now he was armed. Alarms were going off everywhere, and Alex wondered what damage he had done with the second coin. Good old Smithers! He was the one man in MI6 who had never let him down. The corridor led directly to the bridge. Alex passed through an archway, climbed three steps, and found himself in a narrow, curving room, surprisingly empty, with large windows looking over the decks, the containers, and, to one side, the port.

There were two men on duty, sitting in what could have been dentist’s chairs in front of a bank of television screens. One was a second officer that Alex hadn’t seen before. The other was Captain De Wynter. He was on the telephone, talking in a voice that sounded strained and hoarse with disbelief.

“It’s the reefers,” he was saying. “We’re going to have to shut them all down. The whole ship could go up in flames...”

The reefers were refrigerated containers. There were three hundred of them on the *Liberian Star*, storing meat, vegetables, and chemicals that needed to be transported at low temperatures. The containers themselves needed constant cooling, and Alex had smashed the pipes that provided exactly that. At the very least, he was going to cause Major Yu tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of losses as the contents deteriorated. If the chemicals became unstable in the heat, he might even set fire to the whole ship.

The other officer saw Alex first. He muttered something in Dutch, and De Wynter looked around, the phone still in his hand.

Alex raised the gun. “Put it down,” he said.

De Wynter went pale. He lowered the phone.

What did he do now? Alex realized that he had made it this far without any real plan at all. “I want you to get me off this ship,” he said.

“That’s not possible.” De Wynter shook his head. He was afraid of the gun, but he was even more afraid of Major Yu.

Alex glanced at the phone. Presumably it could be connected to Darwin. “Call the police,” he said. “I want you to bring them here.”

“I cannot do that either,” De Wynter replied. He looked a little sad. “There is no way I will help you, child. And there is nowhere for you to go. You might as well give yourself up.”

Alex looked briefly out the window. One of the containers bound for Australia was already being lifted off the ship, dangling on wires beneath a metal frame so huge that in comparison it seemed no bigger than a matchbox. The spreader was controlled by a man in a glass-fronted cabin, high up in the air. The container rose up. In a few seconds it would swing across and down to the piles that were already mounting on the dock.

He judged the distance and the timing. Yes—he could do it. He had arrived at the bridge at exactly the right moment. He pointed the gun directly at De Wynter. “Get out of here,” he snapped.

The captain stayed where he was. He didn’t believe Alex had the nerve to pull the trigger.

“I said—get out!” Alex swung his hand and fired at a radar screen right next to the chair where De Wynter was sitting.

The sound of the gunshot was deafening inside the confined space. The screen shattered, fragments of glass scattering over the work surface. Alex smiled to himself. That was another piece of expensive equipment on the *Liberian Star* that was going to need replacing.

De Wynter didn’t need telling again. He got up and slowly left the bridge, following the second officer, who was already clambering down the stairs. Alex waited until they had gone. He knew they would call for help and come back with half a dozen armed men, but he didn’t care. He had seen his way out. With a bit of luck, he would be gone long before they arrived.

A glass door led onto the outer walkway. Alex opened it and found himself about twenty yards above the nearest container, far enough to break his neck if he fell. The sea was another thirty yards below that. Diving into the water was out of the question. He could see Yu’s men on the main deck, waiting for him to try. But he was too high. They wouldn’t need to shoot him. The impact would kill him first.

But the container he had seen was directly in front of him, moving closer all the time as it traveled over the deck. Alex climbed onto the railing in front of him and tensed himself. The container loomed over him.

He jumped—not down, but up, his arms stretching out. For a moment he was suspended in space, and he wondered if he was going to make it. He grimaced, trying not to imagine the crushing pain, his legs smashing into the deck if he fell. But then his hands caught hold of the lashings beneath the container and he was being carried outward, his legs dangling in the air, his neck and shoulder muscles screaming. The man operating the spreader couldn’t see him. He was like an insect, clinging to the underbelly of the container. And Yu’s men hadn’t noticed him either. They were following orders, their eyes fixed on the deck and the sea below.

Alex had thought the container was moving quickly when he was on the bridge. Now that he was desperately holding on, it seemed to take forever to reach the dock, and he was certain that at any moment, one of Yu’s men would glance up and see him. But he was already over the side of the ship, and now he saw another danger. Drop too early and he would break a leg. Leave it too late and he risked being crushed as the container was set down.

And then someone saw him.

He heard a yell of alarm. It was a worker on the wharf, wearing overalls, a fluorescent jacket, and a hard hat. He probably wasn't working for Yu, but that didn't matter...as far as Alex was concerned, he was just as much a threat. Alex couldn't wait any longer. He let go with both hands and fell for what seemed an eternity through the air. He had been hanging over a container with a tarp cover. The tarp provided a soft landing—even if the wind was knocked out of him as he hit it, shoulders first. He didn't stop to recover his breath but rolled over and climbed down the sides.

As he ran down the dock, dodging behind the containers, Alex tried to work out a strategy. The next few minutes were going to be vital. If he was captured by the port authorities, there was always a chance that he might be handed back to Major Yu. Or if he was locked up, Yu would know where to find him. Either way, Alex knew what the result would be. He would end up dead. He had to stay out of sight until he had reached the mainland itself. So long as he was on the East Arm Wharf, he would never be safe.

But once again luck was on his side. As he came around the corner of the last container tower, a pickup truck drew up in front of him, the back filled with old cartons and empty gas cans. The driver rolled down the window and yelled something at another dockworker. The man replied and the two of them laughed. By the time the truck rumbled forward again, Alex was in the back, lying on his stomach, concealed among the cartons.

The truck followed a railroad line, curving around on the edge of the water, and stopped at a barrier, as Alex had expected. But the security guards knew the driver and waved him through. The truck picked up speed. Alex lay there, feeling the warm Australian breeze on his shoulders as they drove away.

He had done it! He had achieved everything that Ethan Brooke and ASIS had demanded. He had been smuggled illegally into Australia, and on the way he had uncovered much of Major Yu's network: the Chada Trading Agency in Bangkok, Unwin Toys, the *Liberian Star*. For that matter, he had also located Royal Blue for Mrs. Jones. If he could just get to Darwin in one piece and find Ash, his mission would be over and he could finally go home. All he had to do was find a phone.

Twenty minutes later, the truck stopped. The engine cut out and Alex heard the driver door open and shut again. Cautiously, he looked out. The port was out of sight. They had parked outside a café, a brightly colored wooden shack on an empty road. It was called Jake's, and it had a hand-painted sign reading: The Best Pies in Darwin. Alex was desperate for food. He had barely eaten anything for two days. But it was what he saw next to the café that mattered more to him right now. It was a public telephone.

He waited until the driver had disappeared into the building, then climbed out and ran over to the phone. Apart from the last coin that Smithers had given him, he had no money, but according to Ash, he wouldn't need any to make the call. Now, what was the number he had been given? For a horrible moment, the separate digits danced in his head, refusing to come together. He forced himself to concentrate. 795...No, 759...Somehow the full number took shape. He punched it in and waited.

He'd gotten it right. Somehow the numbers were able to override the system, and Alex heard the connection being made. The phone rang three times before it was answered.

“Yes?”

Alex felt a wave of relief. It was Ash's voice. “Ash...it's me. Alex.”

“Alex...thank God! Where are you?”

“I’m in Darwin, I think. Or somewhere near it. There’s a café called Jake’s. About fifteen minutes from the port.”

“Stay where you are. I’m coming to get you.”

“Are you here too? How did you get here?”

A pause, then Ash replied, “I’ll tell you when I see you. Just watch out for yourself.” There was another silence. Alex listened for background noise, anything that might tell him where Ash was. But there was nothing. “I’ll be with you as soon as I can,” Ash said, and hung up.

Alex knew that something was wrong. It had definitely been Ash on the phone but he hadn’t sounded like himself. His voice had been strained, and there had been something in that last pause. It was almost as if he had been waiting to be told what to say.

Alex made a decision. He had contacted Ash first as he had promised. But that might not be enough. He turned his wrist and looked at the watch that Smithers had given him, then deliberately moved the hands to eleven o’clock. According to Smithers, the watch would send out a signal every ten minutes. Ash might not be happy about it, but Alex didn’t care. He wasn’t going to take any more chances. He just wanted to know that MI6 were on their way.

After that, he waited for Ash to arrive. Alex couldn’t think what else to do. He was exhausted after three nights with almost no sleep and weak from lack of food. He crept around the side of the café and sat in the shade, keeping himself out of sight. It was likely that Major Yu’s men were still looking for him, and apart from the knife concealed in his belt, he had no way of defending himself. He had left the gun behind on the bridge. He wished he had it with him now.

Ten minutes later, the door of the café opened and the driver who had brought him here came out carrying a brown paper bag. He got into the pickup truck and drove off again, leaving a plume of dust behind him.

More time passed. There were flies buzzing around Alex’s face, but he ignored them. The café seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by scrubland and on the edge of a road with little traffic. Alex had to struggle not to doze off. But then he saw a car heading toward him, a black four-wheel drive with tinted windows. It pulled in outside the café. Ash got out.

But he wasn’t alone. He hadn’t been driving. His hands were chained in front of him. His black hair was in disarray, and his shirt was torn. A streak of blood ran down the side of his face. He hadn’t seen Alex yet. He looked dazed.

Major Yu got out of the back of the car. He was wearing a white suit with a lavender shirt, buttoned at the neck. He moved slowly, supporting himself on a walking stick. As always, his hands were gloved. At the same time, the driver and another man got out. They were taking no chances. The three of them surrounded Ash. Yu took out the pistol he had used to kill the old man on the *Liberian Star*. He held it up against Ash’s head.

“Alex Rider!” he called out in a thin voice, filled with hate. “You have three seconds to show yourself. Otherwise you will see your godfather’s brains all over the highway. I am counting now!”

Alex realized he wasn’t breathing. They had Ash! What was he to do? Give himself up and they

would both be killed. But could he forgive himself if he turned and ran?

“One...”

He regretted now that he hadn't used the telephone to call ASIS, the police, anyone. He had known something was wrong. How could he have been so stupid?

“Two...”

He had no choice. Even if he tried to run, they would catch him. There were three of them. They had a car. He was in the middle of nowhere. Ash wasn't moving. His shoulders were slumped and he looked miserable, completely defeated.

He stood up, showing himself.

Major Yu lowered the gun and Alex began to walk forward, worn out and defeated. Ash must have been on the *Liberian Star* all the time, a prisoner like him. His eyes were full of pain.

“I'm sorry, Alex,” he rasped.

“Well, here you are at last,” Major Yu said. “I have to say, you've caused me a great deal of time and inconvenience.”

“Go to hell,” Alex snarled.

“Yes, my dear Alex,” Yu replied. “That's exactly where I'm taking you.”

Yu raised the hand with the walking stick, then swung it with all his strength. This was the last thing that Alex remembered—a silver scorpion glinting brilliantly as it swooped toward him out of an Australian sun. He didn't even feel it as it smashed into the side of his head.

“Pick him up!” Yu commanded.

He turned his back on the unconscious boy and climbed back into the car.

MADE IN BRITAIN

THERE WAS A VASE of roses on the table. Alex smelled them first...sweet and slightly cloying. Then he opened his eyes and allowed them to come into focus. They were bright pink, a dozen of them arranged in a porcelain vase with a lace mat underneath. Alex felt sick. The side of his head was throbbing, and he could feel the broken skin where the walking stick had hit him. There was a sour taste in his mouth. He wondered how long he had been lying here.

And where was he? Looking around at the antique furniture, the grandfather clock, the heavy curtains, and the stone fireplace with two sculpted lions, he would have said he was back home in Britain—although he knew that wasn't possible. He was lying on a bed in what could have been a country hotel. A door to one side opened into a bathroom. There were bottles of Molton Browne shampoo and bubble bath beside the sink.

Alex rolled off the bed and staggered into the bathroom. He splashed water on his face and examined himself in the mirror. He looked terrible. Quite apart from the dark hair and skin color and the two fake teeth, his eyes were bloodshot, there was a huge bruise next to his eye, and generally he could have been dumped here by a garbage truck. On an impulse, he reached into his mouth and pulled out the two plastic caps on his teeth. Major Yu knew perfectly well who—and what—he was. There was no need for any further pretense.

He ran himself a bath, and while the water was flowing, he went back into the bedroom. The main door was locked, of course. The window looked out onto a perfect lawn with—bizarrely—a set of croquet hoops arranged in neat lines. Beyond, he could see a rocky outcrop, a jetty, and the sea. He turned back. Someone had left him a snack: smoked salmon sandwiches, a glass of milk, a plate of McVitie's Jaffa Cakes. He ate it all greedily. Then he stripped off his clothes and got into the bath. He didn't know what was going to happen next, and he didn't like to think, but whatever it was, he might as well be clean.

He felt a lot better after half an hour in the hot scented water and although he hadn't been able to get off all the makeup Mrs. Webber had put on him, at least some of his own color had returned. There were fresh clothes in the wardrobe: a Vivienne Westwood shirt and Paul Smith jeans and underwear—both London-based designers. He was still wearing his old clothes, but the belt that Smithers had given him had been taken away. Alex wondered about that. Had Major Yu discovered the knife hidden in the buckle or the jungle supplies inside the leather itself? He was sorry that he hadn't gotten the chance to use it. Maybe there would have been something inside that could help him now.

On the other hand, nobody had searched the pockets of his jeans—or if they had, they had missed the ten-baht coin and the chewing gum pack with the secret detonators. The watch was also still in place, the hands fixed at eleven o'clock, and that gave Alex a sense of reassurance. The eleventh hour indeed. Major Yu might think he held all the cards, but the watch would still be transmitting, and even now MI6 Special Operations must be closing in.

Alex got dressed in the new clothes and sat down in a comfortable armchair. He had even been

supplied with some books to read: *Biggles*, *The Famous Five*, and *Just William*. They weren't quite his taste, but he supposed he should appreciate the thought.

Just after midday, there was a rattle of a key turning in the lock and the door opened. A maid, wearing a black dress with a white apron, came in. She looked Indonesian.

"Major Yu would like to invite you for lunch," she said.

"That's very kind of him," Alex replied. He closed his copy of *Biggles Investigates*. "I don't suppose there's any chance of our eating out?"

"He's in the dining room," the maid replied.

Alex followed her out of the room and down a wood-paneled corridor with oil paintings on the walls. They all showed scenes of the English countryside. Briefly he thought of overpowering the maid and making another bid for freedom, but he decided against it. There was part of him that reacted against the idea of attacking a young woman, and anyway, he had no doubt that—following the events on the *Liberian Star*—Yu would be taking no chances. Security here would be tight.

They reached a grand staircase that swept down to a hall with a suit of armor standing beside a second, monumental fireplace. More classical paintings everywhere. Alex had to remind himself that he was still in Australia. The house didn't fit here. It felt as if it had been imported brick by brick, and he was reminded for a moment of Nikolei Drevin, who had transported his own fourteenth-century castle from Scotland to Oxfordshire. It was strange how very bad men felt a need to live somewhere not just spectacular but slightly insane.

The maid held back and gestured Alex through a door and into a long dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the sea. The room was carpeted with a table and a dozen chairs, suitable for a medieval banquet. The paintings in this room were modern: a portrait by David Hockney and a wheel of color by Damian Hirst. Alex had seen similar works in galleries in London and knew that they must be worth millions. Only one end of the table had been laid. Major Yu was sitting there, waiting for him, the walking stick leaning against his chair.

"Ah, there you are, Alex," he said in a pleasant voice, as if they were old friends meeting up for the weekend. "Please come and sit down."

As he walked forward, Alex examined the snakehead boss properly for the first time, taking in the round, shrunken head, the wire-frame glasses, the white hair sitting so oddly with the Chinese features. Yu was wearing a striped blazer with a white, open-necked shirt. There was a silk handkerchief poking out of his top pocket. His gloved hands were crossed in front of him.

"How are you feeling?" Yu asked.

"My head hurts," Alex replied.

"Yes. I'm afraid I must apologize. I really don't know what came over me, hitting you like that. But the truth is, I was angry. You did a lot of damage on the *Liberian Star* and made it necessary for me to murder Captain De Wynter, which I didn't really want to do."

Alex filed the information away. So De Wynter was dead. He had paid the price for failing a second time.

"Even so, it was unforgivable of me. My mother used to say that you can lose money, you can lose

at cards, but you should never lose your temper. Can I offer you some apple juice? It comes from High House Farm in Suffolk, and it's quite delicious."

"Thank you," Alex said. He didn't know what was going on here but had decided he might as well play along with this madman. He held out his glass, and Yu poured. At the same time, the Indonesian maid came in with the lunch: cold roast beef and salad. Alex helped himself. He noticed that Yu ate very little and held his knife and fork as if they were surgical implements.

"I'm very glad to have had this opportunity to meet you," Major Yu began. "Ever since you destroyed our operation Invisible Sword and caused the death of poor Mrs. Rothman, I've been wondering what sort of boy you were..."

So Mrs. Jones had been right. Major Yu was indeed part of Scorpia. Alex filed the information away, knowing with a sense of dread that it gave Yu another reason to want to kill him...to settle an old score.

"It's just a shame that we have so little time together," Yu went on.

Alex didn't like the sound of that. "I have a question," he said.

"Please go ahead."

"Where is Ash? What have you done with him?"

"Let's not talk about Ash." Yu gave him a thin smile. "You don't have to worry about him. You'll never see him again. How is the beef, by the way?"

"A little bloody for my taste."

Yu sighed. "It's organic. From Yorkshire."

"Where else?" Alex was getting a bit fed up with all this. He toyed with his knife, wondering if he had the speed and the determination to stick it into the man's heart. It might be five or ten minutes before the maid came back. Enough time to find a way out of here...

Yu must have seen the idea forming in Alex's eyes. "Please don't think of anything foolish," he remarked. "There is a pistol in my right-hand jacket pocket, and, as the Americans would say, I am very quick on the draw. I think I could shoot you dead before you had even left your chair—and that would spoil a perfectly pleasant lunch. So come now, Alex. I want to know all about you. Where were you born?"

Alex shrugged. "West London."

"Your parents were both English?"

"I don't want to talk about them." Alex looked around. Suddenly the paintings, the furniture, the clothes, even the food made sense. "You seem to like England, Major Yu," he remarked.

"I admire it greatly. If I may say so, Alex, I have enjoyed having you as my adversary because you are English. It is also one of the reasons I have invited you to eat with me now."

"But what about Invisible Sword? You tried to kill every child in London."

"That was business, and I really was very unhappy about it. You might also like to know, by the way, that I voted against sending a sniper to kill you. It seemed so crude. Some more apple juice?"

“No, thank you.”

“So where do you go to school?”

Alex shook his head. He’d had enough of this game. “I don’t want to talk about myself,” he said. “And certainly not to you. I want to see Ash. And I want to go home.”

“Neither of which is possible.” Yu was drinking wine. Alex noticed that even that was English. He remembered Ian Rider once describing English wine as the sort of liquid that might have been extracted from a cat. But Yu sipped it with obvious enthusiasm.

“I love England, as a matter of fact,” he said. “Since you won’t talk about yourself, perhaps you will permit me to tell you a little about me. My life has been a remarkable one. Maybe one day someone will write a book about me...”

“I’ve never much cared for horror stories,” Alex said.

Yu smiled again—but his eyes were cold. “I like to think of myself as a genius,” he began. “Of course, you might remark that I have never invented anything or written a novel or painted a great painting, despite what I said just now, it is unlikely that I will become a household name. But different people are talented in different ways, and I think I have achieved a certain greatness in crime, Alex. And it’s not surprising that my life story is a remarkable one. How could someone like me have anything else?”

He coughed, dabbed his lips and began again.

“I was born in Hong Kong. Although you wouldn’t believe it to look at me now, I began with nothing. Even my cot was a cardboard box filled with straw. My mother was Chinese. She lived in a single room in a slum and worked as a chambermaid at the Hilton Hotel. Sometimes she would smuggle home soaps and shampoos for me. It was the only luxury I ever knew.

“My father was a guest there, a businessman from Tunbridge Wells, in Kent. She never told me his name. The two of them began an affair, and I have to say that she fell hopelessly in love with him. He used to talk to her about the place where he lived, this country called Great Britain. He promised her that as soon as he had enough money, he would take her with him and he would turn her into a British lady with a thatched cottage with a garden and a bulldog. For my mother, who had nothing, it was like an impossible dream.

“As a young person, I’m sure you have no attachment to your country, but the truth is that it’s a remarkable place. At one time, this tiny island had an empire that stretched all around the world. You have to remember that when I was born, you even owned Hong Kong. Think how many inventors and explorers, artists and writers, soldiers and statesmen have come out of Britain. William Shakespeare! Charles Dickens! The computer was a British invention—as was the Internet. It’s sad that much of your country’s greatness has been squandered by politicians in recent years. But I still have faith. One day, Britain will once again lead the world.

“Anyway, my mother’s affair came to an unhappy end. I suppose it was inevitable. As soon as he found out that she was pregnant, the businessman abandoned her and she never saw him again. Nor did he ever pay a penny toward my upkeep. He simply disappeared.

“But my mother never lost sight of her dream. If anything, it became more intense. She determined that I should grow up with full recognition of my English blood. She named me Winston, of course,

after the great wartime leader Winston Churchill. The first clothes I wore were made in Britain. As the years went on, she became more and more fanatical. For example, one day she decided that I would be educated in a British public school—even though it was obviously quite impossible when she was earning only a few pounds an hour changing beds and cleaning toilets. But nonetheless, when I was six years old, she left her job and began to look for other ways to make money.

“It took her just two years—a tribute, I think, to her single-mindedness and courage. And that was how I found myself, first in a prep school in Tunbridge itself and later at Harrow School, dressed in their smart blue jacket with the marvelous straw hat. All the boys wore them. On Sundays we dressed in cutoff tailcoats...bum freezers we used to call them. It was actually Winston Churchill’s old school, and I found it hard to believe I was there. I mean, I could actually imagine I might be sitting at his desk or reading a book that had once belonged to him. It was thrilling...and my mother was so proud of me! I did sometimes wonder how she could possibly afford it all, but it wasn’t until my second year that I found out, and I must say, it came as a bit of a surprise.

“This is what happened...”

He poured himself some more wine, swirled it in the glass, and drank.

“You might imagine that I was bullied at Harrow,” he said. “After all, this was back in the fifties, and there weren’t many half-Chinese boys there, particularly with a single parent. But by and large everyone was very kind to me. However, there was one boy...a chap by the name of Crispin Odey. The strange thing is that I rather liked him. He was a pleasant enough chap, very good with money. Anyway, I don’t quite know what I did to upset him, but he made a whole lot of rather hurtful remarks, and for a couple of terms, thanks to him, life was very uncomfortable for me. But then my mother heard about it and I’m afraid she dealt with him very severely. A hit-and-run accident, and they never found the driver. But I knew who it was, and I was completely horrified. It was a side of my mother that I had never seen. And that was when I found out the truth.

“It turned out that when I was just six years old, she had managed to track down one of the main snakeheads operating in Hong Kong and had volunteered her services as a paid assassin. I know it sounds remarkable, but I suppose that being abandoned so cruelly had changed her. She no longer had any respect for life. And the fact was, she was extremely good at her new job. She was very small and Chinese, so nobody ever suspected her and she was utterly without mercy because mercy, of course, wouldn’t pay the school fees. And that was how she was supporting me at Harrow! Every time a bill arrived at the start of a new term, she would have to go out and kill someone. It’s strange to think that fifteen men died to make my education possible—sixteen, in fact, when I decided to take up horse riding.

“After she’d finished with Crispin Odey, I never had any more trouble. Even the teachers went out of their way to be pleasant to me. I was actually made head boy in my last term, although between you and me, I was the second choice.”

“What happened to the first choice?”

“He fell off a roof. From Harrow, I went to London University, where I studied politics, and after that I joined the army. I was sent to Sandhurst, and I will never forget the day of my graduation parade, when I received a medal from the queen. I’m afraid it was all too much for my mother. A few weeks later she died quite suddenly. A massive heart attack, they said. I was shaken to the core

because I loved her very much—and here’s something you might like to know. I bribed one of the gardeners and had her remains scattered in the grounds of Buckingham Palace...in the roses. I knew it was something she would have appreciated.”

Major Yu had finished eating and the maid suddenly appeared to clear the dishes. Alex wondered how she had known when to arrive. Dessert was a rhubarb pie served with cream. At the same time, the maid brought in a cheese plate: cheddar, Stilton, and Red Leicester. All English, of course.

“There is not much more to tell,” Yu continued. “I served with distinction in the Falklands and the first Gulf War and was given two letters of commendation. I was as happy in the army as I had been at Harrow...happier, in fact, as I had discovered that—taking after my mother, perhaps—I rather enjoyed killing people, particularly foreigners. I rose to the rank of major, and it was then that the great tragedy of my life occurred. I was diagnosed with a quite serious illness. It was a rare form of osteoporosis known as brittle bone disease. The name tells you everything you need to know. What it meant was that my bones had become very fragile. In recent years, the condition has gotten considerably worse. As you can see, I need a stick to walk. I am forced to wear gloves to protect my hands. It is as if my entire skeleton is made of glass, and the slightest blow could cause a terrible injury.”

“You must be all broken up about that,” Alex remarked.

“You remind me of that boy I mentioned—Crispin Odey,” Yu replied. “He learned how unwise it was to annoy me and so, Alex, will you.”

He poured himself another glass of wine.

“I was forced to leave active service, but that was not the end of my career. I still had an excellent mind, and I was recommended for a job in intelligence...in MI6. That’s quite a coincidence, don’t you think? In other circumstances, you and I could have been working together. Unfortunately, though, it didn’t quite work out that way.

“You see, at first I thought that it was all going to be very exciting. I imagined myself as quite the young James Bond. But I was never invited to be part of Special Operations like you, Alex. I never met anyone senior like Alan Blunt or Mrs. Jones. I was sent to the communications center at Cheltenham. It was a desk job! Can you imagine someone like me slaving away from nine to five in a boring little office, surrounded by secretaries and coffee machines? It was miserable. And all the time I knew that my disease was getting worse and that it was only a matter of time before I would be thrown out and put on the scrap heap.

“And so I decided to look out for myself. Despite everything, a lot of the information that passed my way at Cheltenham was highly sensitive and confidential. And of course there was a market for this sort of material. So, very carefully, I began to steal secrets from British intelligence—and guess where I took them! I went to the very snakehead that had employed my mother when she was in Hong Kong. They were delighted to have me, and quite soon I was being paid quite handsomely for my services.

“In the end I had to resign from MI6. The snakehead was paying me a fortune and they were offering me all sorts of career opportunities very quickly. I rose up the ladder until—by the early eighties—I had become number two in what was now the most powerful criminal organization in Southeast Asia.”

“And I suppose number one fell off a roof,” Alex said.

“As a matter of fact, he drowned...but you seem to have got the general idea.” Yu smiled. “Anyway, it was about this time that I heard rumors of a new organization that was being formed by people who were, in their own way, quite similar to me. I decided to diversify and, using my snakehead connections, I managed to contact them and eventually we met up in Paris to finalize details. That, of course, was the birth of Scorpia and I was one of the founding members.”

“So what are you doing now? Why do you need Royal Blue?”

Major Yu had been helping himself to cheese. He stopped with a piece of cheddar on the end of his knife. “You saw the bomb?” he asked.

Alex said nothing. There was no point in denying it.

“You really are a very capable young man, Alex. I see now that we were quite unwise to underestimate you last time.” Major Yu dropped the cheese onto his plate and reached for a cookie. “I’m going to tell you what the bomb is for because it will amuse me,” he went on. “But then I’m afraid you must be on your way.” He looked at his watch. “The plane will be here any minute.”

“Where am I going, Major Yu?”

“We’ll get to that in a minute. Cheese?”

“Do you have any Brie?”

“Personally, I find French cheese disgusting.” He ate silently for a moment. “There is an island in the Timor Sea, not very far from here, in fact. Its name is Reef Island. You may have heard of it.”

Alex remembered the newscast he had heard on board the *Liberian Star*. A conference was taking place there. The alternative to the G8 summit. A meeting of famous people who were trying to make the world a better place.

“Scorpia has been given the job of destroying the island and the eight so-called celebrities who will be on it,” Yu went on. He was sounding pleased with himself. Alex imagined that must be one of the problems of being a criminal. You could never find anyone to tell about your crimes. “But what makes the task particularly interesting is that we have to make it look like an accident.”

“So you’re going to blow them up,” Alex said.

“No, no, no, Alex. That wouldn’t work at all. We have to be much more subtle. Let me explain.” He swallowed a piece of cheese and dabbed his lips with his napkin. “As it happens, Reef Island is located in what is known as a subduction zone. Perhaps you’ve studied that in geography. What it means is that underneath the sea, a few hundred miles north of the island, there are two tectonic plates pushing against each other with a fault line between them.

“Among its many business interests, the Chada Trading Agency is involved in deep-sea oil exploration and leases an oil platform in the Timor Sea. In the last couple of months, I have arranged for a shaft to be driven into the seabed, precisely over the fault line. This was quite a feat of engineering, Alex. We used the same reverse circulation system that was developed to build the ventilation shafts for the Hong Kong subway. I’m delighted to say that it was designed by Seacore, a British company...once again, one step ahead of the world.

“Normally, the pipe running down from the rig would be no more than five inches in diameter by the time it hit the oil field. However, our shaft will have ample room for Royal Blue. We will place the bomb half a mile below the surface of the seabed. I will then travel to the oil platform and personally detonate it...”

But what was the point? Alex went through what he had just been told, and suddenly he understood. He knew exactly what the result would be. Not just an explosion. Something much, much worse. He couldn't keep the horror out of his voice. “You're going to cause a wave,” he said. “A huge wave...”

“Go on, Alex.” Yu couldn't keep the glee out of his voice.

“A tsunami...” Alex whispered the word.

He could see it clearly. That was what had happened on December 26, 2004. An earthquake underneath the sea. A tsunami that had hit first Sumatra, then the coast of Somalia. More than two hundred thousand people had died.

“Exactly. The bomb will have the effect of lubricating the fault line.” Yu rested one hand on top of the other. “This will force one of the plates to rise.” He lifted the upper hand a few inches. “The result will be a deep water wave, just one yard high. You wouldn't think it could do much harm. But as it approaches the coastline, where the seabed begins to rise, the front will slow down and the rest of the water will pile up behind. By the time it hits Reef Island, a one-hundred-foot wall of water will have formed, traveling at about five hundred miles an hour...the speed of a jumbo jet. One cubic yard of water weighs about one ton, Alex. Imagine hundreds of cubic yards rushing in. There will be no warning. The island will be destroyed utterly. It is lowlying. There will be nowhere to hide. Every building will be smashed. Every single person on the island will be killed.”

“But the tsunami won't stop there!” Alex exclaimed. “What will happen to it after that?”

“That's a very intelligent observation. No. The tsunami will unleash the same amount of energy as several thousand nuclear weapons. It will continue on its way until it hits the coast of Australia. We'll be all right up here in Darwin, but I'm afraid a very large section of the western coast will disappear. Everything from Derby to Carnarvon. Fortunately, there's nowhere very important or even attractive in that part of the country. Broome, Port Headland...few people have even heard of these places. And they're not exactly overpopulated. I wouldn't expect more than about ten or twenty thousand people to die. A small price to pay for a job well done.”

“But I don't understand...” Alex could feel his chest tightening. “You're going to do all this just to kill eight people?”

“Perhaps you didn't hear what I said. Their deaths have to look accidental. Our job is to make the world forget that this stupid conference ever took place. And so we will provide a natural disaster on a massive scale. Who will care about the extinction of eight people when the number of deaths rises into the thousands? Who will remember a little island when an entire continent has been hit?”

“But they'll know it was you! They'll know it was all started with a bomb.”

“That would be true if we used a nuclear bomb. There is an international network of seismographs. The *Poseidon* satellite in outer space. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center. And so on. But the blast made by Royal Blue won't register. It will be lost as the tectonic plates shift and the devastation begins.”

Alex tried to make sense of what he was hearing. He had been sent to uncover a smuggling operation, and somehow instead he had stumbled into this terrible nightmare...another attempt by Scorpia to change the world. He had to stop himself from glancing at his watch. Several hours had passed since he had set the hands to eleven o'clock. Surely MI6 were on their way. Why weren't they already here?

"I expect you're wondering whether such a relatively small bomb will really be able to cause such havoc," Major Yu continued. "Well, there is one other thing you need to know. As luck would have it, in three days' time, a rather special event is taking place. I'm afraid I don't know the astronomical term for it, but what we're talking about is the alignment of three celestial bodies—the sun, the moon, and the earth. And the moon is going to be particularly close. At midnight, in fact, it will be as close as it ever is.

"As a result, there will be a particularly strong gravitational pull on the earth's surface. I'm sorry, Alex. I'm beginning to sound like a schoolteacher. Let me put it more simply. The sun will be pulling one way. The moon will be pulling the other. And for just one hour, from midnight, the tectonic plate will be at its most volatile. A single explosion will be more than enough to begin the process I have described. Royal Blue is the perfect weapon for our needs. Undetectable. Invisible. And above all, British."

Yu fell silent, and in that moment Alex heard the drone of a plane. He looked out the window and saw it circling. It was a seaplane, a tiny two-seater with floats instead of wheels. It could land on the sea right outside the house and tie up on the jetty that Alex had seen from his room. He knew it had come for him.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded.

"Ah, yes. Now we come to the rub." Major Yu had finished eating. He sat back and suddenly the gun was in his hand, pointing at Alex. He had certainly moved quickly. Alex hadn't even seen him draw it. "The easiest and perhaps the most sensible thing would be to shoot you now," he said. "In half an hour you could be at the bottom of the ocean, and neither Mrs. Jones nor Mr. Ethan Brooke would ever know what had happened to you.

"But I'm not going to do that. Why? For two reasons. The first is that I really don't want to get blood on the carpet. You may have noticed that it's an Axminster—from the town of Axminster in Devonshire. The second is more personal. You owe me a great deal of money, Alex. You have to pay for the damage you did on the *Liberian Star*. There is still the rather more considerable debt that you owe to Scorpia following the collapse of Invisible Sword. And the truth is that although you may not realize it, right now you are worth a great deal to me alive.

"How much were you told about my snakehead? People smuggling, weapons, drugs...these are all part of my business. But I have another highly profitable activity based a couple of hundred miles from here in a facility hidden in the heart of the Australian jungle. This facility deals in the sale of human organs."

Alex said nothing. No words would come.

"Do you know how hard it is to find a kidney donor even if you are rich and live in the West?" Yu pointed the gun at Alex's stomach. "You are young and fit. I will be able to sell your kidney for a quarter of a million dollars. And the operation won't even kill you. You will live through it, and after

that we'll be able to come back, perhaps, for your eyes." The gun rose up to the level of Alex's head. "Your eyes will sell for fifty thousand dollars each, leaving you blind but otherwise in good health." The gun dropped again. "You can live without your pancreas. It will make me a further one hundred thousand dollars. While you are recovering from each operation, I will drain off your blood cells and your plasma. They will be kept frozen and sold at five hundred dollars a pint. And finally, of course, there is your heart. The heart of a young healthy boy could fetch up to a million dollars more. Do you see, Alex? Shooting you does me no good at all. But keeping you alive is good for business, and you might even get some satisfaction in knowing, when you do finally die, that you have restored the health of quite a few people around the world."

Alex swore. He spat out every foul word he knew. But Major Yu was no longer listening. The door to the dining room had opened again, but this time it wasn't the maid who had come in. Two men. Indonesian, like the maid. Alex hadn't seen them before. One of them placed a hand on his shoulder but Alex shrugged it off and stood up on his own. He wasn't going to let them drag them out of here.

"Good-bye, Alex," Major Yu said. "I enjoyed meeting you."

"Go to Hell, Major Yu," Alex replied.

He turned around and, followed by the two men, walked out of the room.

SPARE PARTS

THE PLANE WAS A two-seater Piper Super Cub PA-18-150 with a top speed of just 130 miles per hour—but Alex had already been told that they wouldn't be traveling very far. He was sitting behind the pilot in the cramped cockpit with the buzz of the propellers wiping out any chance of conversation. Not that Alex had anything to talk about. His wrists and ankles were shackled. The seat belt had been fastened in such a way that he couldn't reach the release buckle.

He wondered briefly about the balding, red-necked man in front of him—paid to carry a boy to an unspeakable death. Was he married? Did he have children of his own? Alex had considered trying to bribe him. ASIS would pay twenty thousand dollars or more for his safe return. But he never even got a chance. The pilot only glanced at him once, revealing black sunglasses and a blank face, then put on headphones. Alex guessed that he would have been chosen carefully. Major Yu wasn't going to make any more mistakes.

But his worst mistake had already been made. He had left the watch on Alex's wrist...the same watch that was even now—surely—sending out a distress signal to MI6. It had to be. Inside Alex knew that without this one hope, if he didn't believe that despite everything he still had the advantage, he would have been paralyzed with fear. Major Yu's plan for him was the most evil thing he had ever heard...turning him from a human being into a bag of spare parts. Ash had certainly been right about the snakehead, and maybe Alex should have listened to his warnings. These people were death itself.

And yet...

Alex had been locked up at Yu's house throughout the night and for much of the morning. It was now almost midday. How long had it been since he had begun sending the signal? Fifteen hours at the very least. Maybe longer. MI6 would have received the signal in Bangkok. It would take them time to reach Australia. He had nothing to worry about. MI6 would be tracking him even now, watching him every inch of the way as he moved to the east.

But still Alex had to force himself to ignore the little voice in his ear. They should have been here already. They had decided not to bother. After all, he had called them once before when he was a prisoner in the academy in Point Blanc. That time, the panic button had been concealed in a CD player. He had pressed it, and they had done nothing. Was it happening a second time?

No. Don't go there. They would come.

He had no idea where they were heading, and the pilot's body was effectively blocking out the compass and any of the other controls that might have given him a clue. He had assumed at first that they would stick to the coast. After all, the plane had no wheels. It had to land on water. But for the last hour, they had been flying inland, and only the position of the sun gave him any sense of his direction. He looked out the window, past the blur of the propeller. The landscape was flat and rocky, covered in scrub. A brilliant blue river snaked down like a great crack in the surface of the world. Wherever this was, it was huge and empty. There was no sign of any roads. No houses. Nothing.

He tried to make out more of the pilot's features, but the man's eyes were fixed on the controls as if he were making a deliberate effort to ignore his passenger. He pulled on the joystick, and Alex leaned to one side as the plane dipped. Now he saw a canopy of green... a band of rain forest. Yu had spoken of the Australian jungle. Was this what he had meant?

The plane dipped down. Alex had been in rain forests before and recognized the extraordinary chaos of leaves and vines, a thousand different shades and sizes, each one of them endlessly fighting for a place in the sun. Surely there would be nowhere for them to land here? But then they flew over the edge of the canopy, and Alex saw a clearing and a river that swelled suddenly into a lake with a cluster of buildings around the edge and a jetty reaching out to welcome them.

"We're landing," the pilot said—for no obvious reason. It was the first time he had spoken throughout the flight.

Alex felt his stomach shrink and his ears popped as they circled and began their descent. The sound of the engines rose as they neared the surface of the water. They touched down, sending spray in two directions. An osprey, frightened by the sudden arrival, leapt out of the undergrowth in a panic of beating wings. The pilot brought the plane around and they headed smoothly toward the jetty.

Two men had come out. They were both muscular, black, unsmiling, dressed in dirty jeans and string vests. They were Aboriginal. One of them was carrying a rifle, slung over his bare shoulder. The pilot cut the engines and opened the door. He had unhooked a paddle from the side of the cockpit and used it to steer the plane the last few yards. The two men helped tie it to the jetty. One of them opened the door and released Alex from his seat. Nobody spoke. That was perhaps more unnerving than anything else.

Alex took a look around him. The compound was clean and well ordered, with lawns that had recently been mown and neat flower beds. All the buildings were made of wood, painted white, with low roofs stretching out over long verandas. There were four houses, square and compact with open shutters and fans turning behind. Each of them had a balcony on the second floor with views down to the lake. One of the buildings was an office and administration center connected to a metal radio tower with two satellite dishes. There was a water tower and an electrical generator with a fence running around it, topped with razor wire.

The last building was the hospital itself, long and narrow with a row of windows covered in mosquito net and a red cross painted on the front door. This was where Alex would be sent when the time came... not once but again and again until there was nothing left of him. The thought made him shiver despite the damp heat of the afternoon, and he turned his head away.

At first sight, there didn't seem to be too much security—but then Alex noticed a second fence, this one on the edge of the compound and about ten yards high. It was painted green to blend in with the forest beyond. There were no boats moored to the jetty and no sign of any boathouse, so an escape downriver would be impossible too—unless he swam. And at the end of the day, what would be the point of breaking out of here? He had seen from the plane. He was in the middle of the outback with nowhere to go.

The two Aboriginals had each clamped hold of one of his arms, and now they led him toward the administrative building. As they reached the door, a young woman appeared, dressed as a nurse. She was short, plump, and blond. She had put on bright red lipstick, which seemed strangely at odds with

her starched white uniform. One of her stockings had runs.

“You must be Alex,” she said. “I’m Nurse Hicks. But you can call me Charleen.”

Alex had never heard such a broad Australian accent. And what the woman was saying was simply crazy. She was welcoming him as if he might actually be glad to be here.

“Come right in,” she continued. Then she noticed the handcuffs. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!” she exclaimed in a voice full of indignation. “You know we don’t need those here, Jacko. Will you please remove them?”

One of the men produced a key and freed Alex’s hands and feet. The nurse tut-tutted at them, then opened the door and led Alex down a corridor that was clean and simple, with rush matting and whitewashed walls. Fans were turning overhead, and there was music playing somewhere... a Mozart opera.

“The doc will see you now,” the nurse said brightly, as if he had booked an appointment weeks ago.

There was another door at the far end, and they went through. Alex found himself in a sparsely furnished room—little more than a desk and two chairs. There was a screen to one side, a small fridge, and a cart with some bottles, a stethoscope, and a pair of scalpels. The window was open, with a view of the jetty from where they had just come.

A man was sitting behind the desk, dressed not in a white coat but a turquoise open-neck shirt with the sleeves rolled up and jeans. He was in his forties, with thick blond hair and a craggy, weather-beaten face. He didn’t look like a doctor. He hadn’t shaved for a couple of days, and his hands were grubby. There was a glass of beer on his desk and an ashtray with a pile of stubs.

“Good day, Alex.” He also spoke with an Australian accent. “Take a seat!”

It wasn’t an invitation. It was a command.

“I’m Bill Tanner. We’re going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next few weeks, so I might as well get a few things clear from the start. Fancy a beer?”

“No,” Alex replied.

“You’d better drink something anyway,” the nurse said. “You don’t want to get dehydrated.” She went over to the fridge and produced a bottle of mineral water. Alex didn’t touch it. He had already decided. He wasn’t going to play these people’s game.

“How was the flight?” Tanner asked.

Alex didn’t answer.

The doctor shrugged. “You’re angry. That’s okay. I’d be pretty angry if I were in your shoes. But maybe you should have thought about the consequences before you took on the snakehead.”

He leaned forward, and Alex knew, with a sense of revulsion, that he had had this conversation many times before. Alex wasn’t the first person to be brought unwillingly to this secret hospital. Others would have sat right where he was sitting now.

“Let me tell you how this works,” Dr. Tanner began. “You’re going to die. I’m sorry to have to tell you that, but you might as well get used to it. We all have to die sometime, although for you it’s

probably a little sooner than expected. But you have to look on the bright side. You're going to be well looked after. We have a really qualified team here, and it's in our interests to keep you going as long as possible. You're going to have a lot of surgery, Alex. There are some bad days ahead. But you'll come through...I know you will. We'll help you to the finish line."

Alex glanced briefly at the cart, measuring the distance between himself and the scalpel. He thought about making a grab for it, using it as a weapon. But that wouldn't help him. Better to take it with him, to find a use for it later. He realized that the doctor was waiting for him to reply. He answered with a single, ugly swearword. Tanner just smiled.

"Your language is a little ripe, son," he said. "But that's all right. I've heard it all before." He gestured out the window. "Now, you're probably wondering how you can escape from here," he went on. "You've seen the fence, and you're thinking you can climb over it. Or maybe you've looked at the river and decided you can try swimming. It all looks pretty easy, doesn't it? No TV cameras. Just the seven of us in the compound. Me, four nurses, Jacko, and Quombi. Not much security...that's what you're thinking.

"Well, I'm sorry to tell you, mate. But you're wrong. You go out at night and you're going to have to reckon with Jacko's dog. It's a pit bull. His name is Spike, and he's a nasty piece of work. He'll rip you apart as soon as look at you. As for the fence, it's electrified. Touch it and it'll take you a week to wake up. And you're not getting anywhere near the generator—not unless you know how to bite your way through razor wire—so you can forget about tampering with the current.

"And even if you did manage to get out, it wouldn't do you much good. We're on the edge of the Kakadu National Park...two billion years old and as bad as the world was when it began. The start of Arnhem Land is about a mile from here, but that's a mile of tropical rain forest, and you'd never find your way through. Assuming a death adder or a king brown didn't get you, there are spiders, wasps, stinging nettles, biting ants, and—waiting for you on the other side—saltwater crocodiles." He jerked a thumb. "There are a hundred ways to die out there, and all of them are more painful than anything we've got lined up for you here.

"That leaves the river. Looks pretty tempting, doesn't it? Well, there are no boats here. No canoes or kayaks or rafts or anything else you can get your hands on. We even keep the coffins locked up after one guy tried to bust out in one of those. You remember that, Charleen?"

The nurse laughed. "He was using the lid as a paddle."

"But he didn't get very far, Alex, and neither would you. Because this is the start of the storm season...what the Aboriginals call Gunumeleng. The water's swollen and fast-moving. About ten minutes downriver you'll hit the first rapids, and after that it just gets worse and worse. You try to swim, you'll be cut to pieces on the rocks. You'll almost certainly drown first. And waiting for you a mile downstream is the Bora Falls. A fifty-yard drop with a ton of water crashing down every minute. So do you get what I'm saying? You're stuck here, mate, and that's that."

Alex said nothing, but he was storing away everything Tanner was telling him. It was just possible that the doctor was giving away more than he realized. Outside the window, he heard a sudden whirring. The engine of the Piper had started again. He glanced out and saw the seaplane moving away from the jetty, preparing to take off.

"We're not going to lock you up, Alex," Tanner went on. "The grub's good, and if you want a beer,

just help yourself. There's no TV, but you can listen to the radio, and I think we've got a few books. The point I'm trying to make is—right now, you're here as our guest. Soon you'll be here as our patient, and after we've begun work, you won't be going anywhere. But until then, I want you to take it easy."

"We have to watch your blood pressure," the nurse muttered.

"That's right. And now, if you don't mind, I'd like you to roll up a sleeve so I can take a blood sample. It doesn't matter which arm. I also want a urine sample. It looks to me like you're pretty fit, but I need to get it all down on the computer."

Alex didn't move.

"It's your choice, son," Tanner said. "You cooperate or you don't cooperate. But if you want to play hardball, I'll have to call Jacko and Quombi in. They'll rough you up a little and then they'll tie you down and I'll get what I want anyway. You don't want that, do you? Make it easy on yourself..."

Alex knew there was no point refusing. Although it made him sick, he allowed Tanner and the nurse to give him a thorough examination. They checked his reflexes, probed his eyes, ears, and mouth, weighed and measured him, and took the various samples. At last they let him go.

"You've looked after yourself, Alex," Tanner said. "For an English immigrant, you're in great shape." He was obviously pleased. "Your blood type is A positive," he added. "That's going to be an easy match."

It was as he was putting his clothes back on that he did it. Tanner was typing something into his computer. The nurse was looking over his shoulder. Alex was pulling on his shoes, leaning against the cart as if to support himself. He allowed one hand to cover the scalpel, then slid it sideways and dropped it into his pants pocket. He would have to walk very carefully for the next few minutes or he'd give himself a nasty cut. He just hoped nobody would notice what he had done.

The nurse looked up and saw that he was dressed. "I'll take you to your room," she volunteered. "You should have a rest. We'll bring you supper in about an hour."

The sun had already set. The sky was a deep gray with a streak of red like a fresh wound above the horizon. It had begun to rain, fat drops of water bursting one at a time along the ground.

"There's going to be another storm," the nurse said. "I'd get tucked up and have an early night if I were you. And remember...stay indoors. The dog's trained not to come into the buildings. I mean, this *is* a medical facility. But remember—take one step outside and he'll go for you...and we don't want you losing too much of that blood of yours, do we? Not at five hundred dollars a pint!"

She left Alex alone in a small room on the ground floor with a bed, a table, and a single fan rotating in the center of the ceiling. In one corner, there was a heavy silver filing cabinet. Alex opened it, but there was nothing inside. A second door led into a small shower room, which also contained a toilet and a sink. Alex slid the scalpel out of his pocket and hid it inside the hanging roll of toilet paper. He didn't know if he would have any use for it, but at least it made him feel better having taken it. Maybe these people weren't quite as clever as they thought.

He went back into the bedroom. A single window looked down to the lake. The Piper Super Cub had gone. Alex had watched it become nothing more than a speck in the sky at the same time as he was being examined.

He sat down on the bed and tried to collect his thoughts. Only the day before he had been in Darwin, congratulating himself on what he had achieved, thinking that his mission was over. And now this! How could he have been so stupid? He wondered what was happening to Ash. He still didn't understand why the two of them had been separated. If Yu knew that Ash was working for ASIS, why hadn't he sent him here too? Alex was filled with a longing to see his godfather again. It made everything even worse being here alone.

About an hour later, the door opened and a second nurse came in carrying a tray. She was dark-haired and slim and would have been pretty except that she had a broken nose that had set badly. She was younger than Charleen but equally welcoming.

"I'm Isabel," she said. "I'm going to be looking after you. I've got a room just past the stairs, halfway down the corridor, so if you need anything, just yell."

She set the tray down. Alex's dinner consisted of steak and chips, fruit salad, and a glass of milk, but the sight of the food sickened him. He knew they were only building him up for what lay ahead.

He noticed two pills in a plastic cup. "What are these?" he asked.

"Just something to help you sleep," Isabel replied. "Some of our patients have difficulty nodding off, especially the first couple of nights. And it's important you get your rest." She paused at the door. "You're the youngest we've ever had," she said, as if Alex wanted to know. "Leave the tray outside the door. I'll pick it up later."

Alex picked at the food. He wasn't hungry, but he knew he had to keep up his strength. Outside, the rain fell more heavily. It was the same tropical rain that he had experienced in Jakarta. He could hear it hammering against the roof and splashing into ever-widening puddles. There was a flicker of lightning, and for a couple of seconds he saw the rain forest, black and impenetrable. It seemed to have moved closer, as if it was trying to swallow him up.

Later, somehow, he slept. He didn't take off any of his clothes. He couldn't bear to. He simply lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the first light of the morning was already slanting in. His clothes felt damp. His muscles ached. He lifted his wrist and examined the watch. The two hands were still set at eleven o'clock.

Almost twenty-four hours had passed since he had called for help. He listened to the world outside. The harsh cry of some sort of bird. The rustle of the grasshoppers. The last drip of the water as it fell from the branches. There was nobody out there. MI6 hadn't arrived yet, and Alex couldn't fool himself any longer. Something had gone wrong. The watch wasn't working. They never were going to come.

DEAD OF NIGHT

TWO DAYS LATER, IN the afternoon, the Piper Super Cub returned.

By now, Alex had fallen into a strange mood and one that he could barely understand. It was almost as if he had accepted his fate and could no longer find the strength or even the desire to escape it. He had met the two other women working at the hospital: Nurse Swaine and Nurse Wilcox, who had proudly told him that she would be his anesthetist. Nobody had been unkind to him. In a way, that was what made it all so nightmarish. They were always checking that he had food and water. Would he like something to read? Would he like to listen to some music? Soon, the very sound of their voices made his skin crawl, but he couldn't break free of the feeling that they owned him and always would.

But he hadn't given up completely. He was still searching for a way out of this hideous trap. The river was impossible. There were no boats; nothing that would pass as a boat. He had followed the fence all the way around. There were no gaps, no convenient overhanging branches. He had considered blowing a hole in it. He still had the one coin that Smithers had given him. But the fence was connected to an electrical circuit. The guards would know instantly what he had done, and without a map, a compass, or a machete, Alex doubted he would be able to find a way through the rain forest.

He thought about sending a radio message. He had seen the radio room in the administration building...it was neither locked nor guarded. He soon realized why. The radio transmitter was connected to a numeric keypad. You had to punch in a code to activate it. Major Yu really had thought of everything.

Alex watched as the plane hit the surface of the lake and began a slow, lazy turn toward the jetty. He had been expecting it. Dr. Tanner had told him it would be coming the night before.

"It's your first customer, Alex," he had said cheerfully. "A man called R. V. Weinberg. You may have heard of him."

As usual, Alex said nothing.

"He's a reality TV producer from Miami. Very successful. But he's contracted a serious eye disease, and he needs two transplants. So it looks as if we'll be starting with your corneas. We'll operate first thing tomorrow morning."

Alex examined the American from a distance as he was helped out of the plane. Dr. Tanner had warned him not to approach or try to speak to the "customer." It was one of the house rules. But looking at him, Alex found himself filled with more hatred than he had ever felt for any human being.

Weinberg was overweight in a soft, flabby way. He had curling gray hair and a face that could have been made of putty, with sagging cheeks and jowls. He was a millionaire, but he dressed shabbily, his gut pressing against his Lacoste shirt. But it wasn't just his appearance that disgusted Alex. It was his selfishness, his complete lack of heart. Tomorrow Alex would be blind. This man would take his sight without thinking about it simply because it was what he wanted and he had the money to pay for it. Major Yu, Dr. Tanner, and the nurses were evil in their own way. But Weinberg,

the successful businessman from Miami, made him physically sick.

He waited until the man had disappeared into the house that had been prepared for him, then walked down to the edge of the lake. So this was it. He had just one night to make his escape. After that it really would be impossible.

But the anger that Alex had felt had broken through his sense of helplessness. It had come like a slap in the face, and suddenly he was ready to fight back. These people thought he was helpless. They thought they'd covered everything. But they hadn't noticed the missing scalpel. And there was something even more important that they'd overlooked—despite the fact that it was sitting there right in front of them.

The plane.

The pilot had climbed out, dragging a kit bag with him. It looked as if he was going to stay until Weinberg was ready to leave. Alex had no doubt that the Piper would be incapacitated, the engine closed down and the keys locked away. And Dr. Tanner would be fairly certain that no fourteen-year-old boy knew how to fly.

But that was his mistake—to leave the plane, and everything inside it, moored to the jetty.

Alex examined it, working out the angles, thinking about what lay ahead.

They sent Alex to bed at eight thirty, and Nurse Isabel came into the room once he was tucked in. She was carrying two sleeping pills and a little cardboard cup of water.

“I don't want to sleep,” Alex said.

“I know, dear,” Isabel replied. “But Dr. Tanner says you've got to get your rest.” She held out the pills. “It's going to be a big day for you tomorrow,” she went on. “You're going to need your rest.”

Alex hesitated, then took the pills. He threw them into his mouth and swallowed the water.

The nurse smiled at him. “It won't be too bad,” she said. “You'll see.” She put a hand to her mouth. “Or rather, you won't...”

They checked Alex's room an hour later and again at eleven. Both times they saw him lying, utterly still, in bed. In a way, Dr. Tanner was surprised. He had been expecting Alex to try something. After all, Major Yu had warned him to take extreme care with this particular boy, and the fact was that tonight was his last chance. But it sometimes happened that way. It seemed that—despite his reputation—Alex had accepted the hopelessness of his situation and had chosen to find a brief escape in sleep.

Even so, Dr. Tanner was a cautious man. Before he went to bed himself, he called the two guards, Quombi and Jacko, into his office.

“I want the two of you outside the room all night,” he ordered.

The two men looked at each other in dismay. “That's crazy, boss,” Jacko said. “The kid's asleep. He's been asleep for hours.”

“He can still wake up.”

“So he wakes up! Where’s he going to go?”

Tanner rubbed his eyes. He liked to get a good night’s sleep before he operated, and he was in no mood for a lengthy debate. “I’ve got my orders from Major Yu,” he snapped. “You want to argue with *him*?” He thought for a moment, then nodded. “All right. Let’s do it this way. Jacko—you take the first shift until four o’clock. Quombi—you take over then. And make sure that dog of yours stays outside the whole time. I just want to be sure that no one goes anywhere tonight. Okay?”

The two men nodded.

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow...”

At three thirty that night, Jacko was sitting on the porch of Alex’s building, reading a magazine he had read fifty times before. He was in a bad mood. He had passed Alex’s window at least a dozen times, listening for the faintest sound. There’d been nothing. It seemed to Jacko that everyone had got themselves into a complete panic about this kid. What was so special about him? He was just one of the many who had passed through the hospital. Some had screamed and cried. Some had tried to buy their way out. All of them had ended the same way.

The last thirty minutes of his watch ticked away. He stood up and stretched. A few yards away, lying on the grass, Spike cocked an ear and growled.

“It’s all right, dog,” Jacko said. “I’m going to bed. Quombi will be here soon.”

He belched, stretched a second time, and walked off into the darkness.

Ten minutes later, Quombi took his place. The other man was the younger of the two and had spent almost a third of his life in jail until Dr. Tanner had found him and brought him here. He liked his work at the hospital, especially taunting the patients as they got weaker and weaker. But he was in a bad mood right now. He needed his sleep. And he didn’t get paid overtime for working through the night.

As he reached the building, his eye was caught by something glinting in the grass just in front of the door. It was some sort of foreign coin. Quombi didn’t even wonder how it had gotten there. Money was money. He walked right over and reached down to pick it up.

He was faintly aware of something falling out of the sky, but he didn’t look up quickly enough to see it. The silver filing cabinet could have crushed him, but he was lucky. One corner struck him, a glancing blow on the side of the head. Even so, it was enough to knock him out instantly. Fortunately, it made little sound as it thudded into the soft grass. Quombi fell like an axed tree. The dog got up and whined. It knew that something was wrong, but it had never been trained for this. It went over and sniffed at the motionless figure, then sat on its hind legs and scratched.

On the first-floor balcony, Alex Rider looked down at his handiwork with grim satisfaction.

He had never been asleep. He had palmed the pills and swallowed only water and had been waiting quietly ever since. He had gotten up several times in the night, waiting for Jacko to leave, and had heard the words he had spoken to the dog. That was when he had gotten dressed and set to work.

Carrying the heavy filing cabinet up one flight of stairs had almost been beyond him, and it was probably only desperation that had lent him strength as he clutched it in both arms and balanced it on

his knee. The worst part had been making sure the metal frame never banged against the walls or the wooden steps. Nurse Swaine had a room on the ground floor, halfway down the corridor, and the slightest sound might awaken her.

He had dragged it into the bedroom over the front door and, with one last effort, had somehow managed to heave it up onto the balcony rail, balancing it there while he fumbled in his pocket. He had only just been in time. Quombi had made his appearance a few seconds after he had dropped the ten-baht coin that Smithers had given him onto the lawn as bait. From that moment, the trap had been set.

And it had worked. Jacko was in bed. From the sound of it, Nurse Swaine hadn't woken up. Quombi was unconscious. With a bit of luck, he might even have fractured his skull. And the dog hadn't spoiled it all by barking.

The dog was next.

Alex crept back downstairs and went over to the main door. As he appeared, Spike began to growl, its hackles rising and its ugly brown eyes glaring out of the darkness. But—like Dr. Tanner—Nurse Hicks had told him more than she should have. She had said that the dog was trained not to come into the building. The animal was clearly lethal. Even for a pit bull, it was ugly. But it wouldn't harm him so long as he didn't step outside.

“Nice dog,” Alex muttered.

He stretched out his hand. He was holding a piece of steak that he had been given on the first night. It had been kind of Dr. Tanner to warn him that there was a dog. Cut into the meat were the six sleeping pills that he had been given over the last three days. The question was—would the dog take the bait? It didn't move, so Alex threw the meat onto the grass, close to the sprawled-out body of the guard. Spike ran over to it, his stubby tail wagging. He looked down, sniffed, and scooped up the meat greedily, swallowing it without even chewing.

Just as Alex had hoped.

It took ten minutes for the pills to take effect. Alex watched as the dog grew more and more drowsy until finally he collapsed onto one side and lay still, apart from the rise and fall of his stomach. At last things seemed to be going Alex's way. But even so, he stepped outside cautiously, expecting either the dog or his master to wake up at any time. He had no need to worry. He scooped up the coin—it was lying a few inches from the edge of the filing cabinet—and hurried into the night.

There was a soft echo of thunder that trembled through the air like a drum rolling down a hill. It wasn't raining yet, but there was going to be another storm. Good. That was exactly what Alex wanted. He checked left and right. The compound was kept permanently lit by a series of arc lamps. The rest of the hospital staff, the pilot, and the American television producer would all be fast asleep. Alex hesitated for just a few seconds, thinking how wonderful it would be if MI6—perhaps Ben Daniels and a platoon of SAS men—chose this moment to make their appearance. But he knew what wasn't going to happen. It was all up to him.

He hurried toward the jetty. If only he had learned how to fly! He might have been able to get the Piper started up and in minutes he would have been out of here, on his way to freedom. But at fourteen, and despite all the other skills his uncle had taught him, he had been too young for flying lessons. Never mind. The plane was still going to be useful to him—for that was Dr. Tanner's big

mistake. The security at the hospital had been thoroughly checked—*but only when the Piper was away*. Right now it was back, and even though he couldn't fly it, the seaplane was still going to help him escape.

He reached the jetty without being seen and crouched in the shadow of the plane, which was sitting on its two floats, rocking gently in the water. There was another rumble of thunder, louder this time, and a few drops of water splashed against Alex's shoulders. The storm was going to break very soon. Alex examined the Piper Super Cub. There were two metal struts on each side, supporting the weight of the cockpit and fuselage. They tapered to a point, where they were bolted into the long, fiberglass floats. Just as he remembered.

Alex reached into his pocket and took out the ten-baht coin again. It was the last one that Smithers had given him, and it occurred to him that all three would have saved his life. He placed it against the larger of the metal struts. He looked up at the sky. There were few stars tonight, the clouds swirling overhead. Behind them, the lightning flickered, white and mauve. Alex had the chewing gum pack in his hand. He waited for the thunder and pressed the switch at exactly the right moment.

There was a flash and a small explosion. Even without the storm, it might not have been heard. But the coin had done its job. One of the struts had been ripped apart. The other had come free. The Piper sagged in the water. Alex lay down on the jetty and pressed his feet against the float, pushing with all his strength. Slowly the float moved away from the main body of the plane. Alex pushed harder. The float came free. The rest of the plane sagged uselessly in the water. Moving more quickly now, Alex grabbed hold of the float and dragged it to the shore.

What he had was something almost exactly the same shape and size as a kayak or a canoe. He had even managed to blow a hole in the top, which would allow his legs to fit inside. Admittedly, the float had no foot braces, no thigh hooks, and no support for his lower back. The hull was too flat. That would make it stable in the water, but with such a wide footprint it would be hard to control. It was also much too heavy. Most modern kayaks are made of Kevlar or graphite cloth, glued together and strengthened with resin. The float from the Piper would be as nimble as a London bus. But at least it would carry him. It would just have to do.

Alex had gone kayaking three times in his life. Twice with his uncle, Ian Rider, in Norway and Canada. Once in Wales with the Brookland School when he was doing his Duke of Edinburgh award. He'd had some experience with rapids—the pillows and eddies, the holes and the pour-overs that made the journey such a white-knuckle ride. But the truth was, he was no expert. Far from it. All he could remember of his last trip was speed, screams, and exploding water. He had been twelve at the time and had thought himself lucky to reach thirteen.

The scalpel was back in his pocket, wrapped in toilet paper to prevent the blade from jabbing into him. Now he took it out and unwrapped it, glad that he'd decided to take it from Dr. Tanner's office in the first place. Being careful not to slip and slice open the palm of his own hand, he cut away the jagged edges where the strut had been torn away, trying to make a smooth line. He knew that the journey ahead of him was going to be tough. He didn't want his stomach and hips to be cut to pieces on the way. The blade was small but very sharp. Soon the float was ready. He left it on the shoreline.

Now he needed a paddle.

That was the easy part. For all his smug jokes about coffin lids, Dr. Tanner had overlooked the

obvious. The Piper Sea Cub itself carried a paddle as part of its safety equipment. Alex had noticed it when he had flown in, clipped to the side wall of the cockpit. The pilot had used it to steer the plane ashore.

Alex went back to the edge of the lake, where the plane seemed to have tilted even farther below the surface of the water. Eventually, it would sink. He found a piece of the broken strut and twisted it free. Now he had a makeshift crowbar. He waited for another roll of thunder, then used it to smash a window, then opened the passenger door from the inside. The paddle was there. He reached in and took it.

Alex was tempted to get under way at once, but he made himself wait. If the rapids were as bad as Tanner had described, he couldn't possibly risk hitting them in the dark. He needed the first light of dawn. It was raining harder now. Alex was soaked through. But in a way he was glad. The rain would provide him with cover if anyone chanced to look outside. While he was on the wide section of the lake, he would be exposed. It would take him about five minutes of hard paddling to reach the cover of the rain forest.

He needed a diversion, and it suddenly occurred to him that the Piper could provide it. Once again, he worked out the various possibilities. Could he do it? Yes—he had at least another hour until he would have enough light to take on the river. He might as well put the time to good use. And he wanted to leave his mark on Dr. Tanner, R. V. Weinberg, and this entire setup.

Alex smiled grimly. These people were poison, but they'd been in control for too long.

Now it was time to bite back.

WHITE WATER

ALEX WENT BACK TO the plane and soon found what he was looking for, rummaging around in the hold: two big empty cans that might have been used to carry water or fuel. He needed a length of rubber tubing and tore it out of the engine itself. It didn't matter. This plane wasn't going anywhere. He opened the nozzle under the wing and put one end into the fuel tank and the other into his mouth and sucked, reeling back, gagging as the acrid taste of aviation fuel cut into his throat. Nothing happened. He forced himself to try again, and this time it worked. He had created a vacuum, and the liquid was flowing out. He dragged over the cans and filled them both.

By the time he had finished, the cans were almost too heavy to lift. Gritting his teeth, he set off across the lawn, heading back to the hospital. He knew he was taking a risk, but he didn't care. He wondered how many other people had been brought here, poor refugees who had set out in hope of a better life but who had never arrived. He wanted to wipe this place off the face of the earth. Someone should have done it years ago.

The biggest risk of all was creeping into Dr. Tanner's office. The first thin cracks of light were appearing in the sky, and one of the nurses could wake up at any time. But he found what he was looking for in a drawer of the doctor's desk. A cigarette lighter. Tanner should have known that smoking could be harmful to his health. It was certainly going to prove expensive.

Moving faster but still being careful not to make any sound, Alex emptied both cans over the side of the building, the veranda, the roof. The fuel sat on top of the rainwater, not mixing with it as it was carried down the drainpipes and along the gutters. He saw it in the puddles, a strange mauve color that almost seemed to glow. When he had just half a can left, he went back to the lake, leaving a trail of fuel behind. The can was empty. He threw it into the water, then climbed into his makeshift kayak, resting the paddle across his legs.

He was almost ready.

The paddle was too short, and the kayak was hopelessly unbalanced. It should have been trimmed out—with the bow and the stem holding the same position in the water. Unfortunately, the hole he had made wasn't central. He tried to shift his weight. At once he found himself wavering helplessly and thought he was going to capsize, but at the last minute he managed to right himself. He tried again more cautiously, and this time he got it right. The float sat evenly on the surface. He dropped a shoulder. The fiberglass dug into his back, but the kayak tilted slightly. He had it under control.

He took a deep breath and pushed off.

At the last minute, he flicked the lighter on. The tiny flame leapt up, battling against the falling rain. Alex touched it against the grass, and at once the fire took hold, rushing up toward the hospital, which was now clearly visible in the rapidly breaking day. Alex didn't wait for it to arrive. He was already paddling, leaning forward and driving with his shoulders to give each stroke more power. He wobbled a couple of times as he got used to the weight, but the float was living up to its name. It was carrying him away.

Behind him, the line of flame reached the hospital.

The result was more spectacular than Alex could have hoped for. The rainwater had spread the aviation fuel everywhere, and although the wood was wet on the surface, years of Australian sunshine had baked it dry inside. Alex heard the soft explosion as the fire caught hold and felt the heat on his shoulders. He glanced back to see that the entire building had become a fireball. The rain was actually steaming as it hit the roof, and there was an epic struggle going on between the falling water and the rising flame. Nobody had come outside yet, but suddenly the American, R. V. Weinberg, appeared, dressed ridiculously in striped pajamas, his pant legs on fire. Alex smiled grimly as he hopped about, screaming, in the rain. It wasn't just his eyes that were going to need medical treatment.

Jacko was next, shocked out of his sleep and unable to take in what had happened. He was followed by Dr. Tanner. By now, it wasn't just the hospital that was on fire. On the other side of the rain, the administrative building and one of the houses was also alight. The whole compound was being torn apart.

Tanner looked around him and saw Quombi lying stretched out on the grass, the great bulk of the filing cabinet still resting on his head and neck. He understood at once. "The boy!" he shouted. "Find the boy!"

Weinberg had thrown himself into a puddle and lay there whimpering. The rest of them ignored him, scattering around the complex looking for Alex. But even if they had thought of looking on the lake, they were already too late. Alex was already out of sight, behind the curtain of rain. There was a deafening crack and the generator shuddered to a halt with a series of sparks and a plume of black smoke. Unable to contend with the joint attack of water and fire, the electricity had failed. Tanner howled.

"Sir—the plane!" Jacko had noticed the Piper resting lopsidedly on its single float.

With the rain streaming down his face, Tanner gazed at it and pieced together what had happened. Now he knew where Alex had gone. He scanned the river, searching for him, but the smoke, the rain, and the half-light had blotted out the world. But he couldn't have gone far. It wasn't over yet.

Dr. Tanner dragged his cell phone out of his pocket and began to dial.

Alex heard the first rapids before he saw them. The lake wasn't a lake at all...it was simply a widening of the river. There was probably a word for it, but it had been far too long since he had sat in a geography lesson. At the far end, it became narrower again, the banks closing in like a letter *V*, and Alex could feel the current driving him on. He hardly had any need to paddle. At the same time, the rain forest closed in on both sides, the trees towering above him, the foliage squeezing out the very air. And there was a sound that he remembered well. It was distant and elemental and immediately filled him with dread. Rushing water, somewhere around the corner, daring him to come on.

He dipped the paddle into the water, testing his makeshift kayak, knowing that he would have to be able to twist and turn, reacting to whatever the river threw at him with split-second timing. He could see already that he wasn't going to be able to stop. The current was too strong and the banks too steep. The nearest trees simply disappeared into the water, the roots trailing down with ugly-looking rocks behind. But at least he was putting distance between himself and the compound...or what was

left of it. And Dr. Tanner had already told him that there were no boats. The Piper was a wreck. Smoke was still rising from the hospital—he could see it over the line of the trees. There was no way that anyone would be able to follow him.

He turned the corner and came to the first section of rapids. The sight reminded him that he wasn't safe yet, that the worst still lay ahead of him and that he might only have exchanged one death for another.

Ahead of him, the river dipped steeply downward, hemmed in by massive boulders and tree trunks on both sides. A series of jagged ledges had created a sort of natural staircase. If he landed where the water was too shallow, the kayak would be snapped in half—and Alex with it. White water was frothing and foaming, thousands of gallons thundering down from one level to the next. To make matters worse, the whole stretch was dotted with boils, areas where the water were rushing to the surface as if it was being heated in a saucepan. Hit one of those and he would lose all control, and then he'd be completely at the mercy of the river.

“The thing is, Alex, you're never really in control, whatever you may think. Just keep paddling and never fight the current because the current will always win.”

The words of his uncle, spoken a lifetime ago, came to his mind. Alex wished he could grasp some comfort from them. He felt like a loose button in a washing machine. His fate was out of his hands. Gritting his teeth, he tightened his hold on the paddle and charged forward.

Nothing quite made sense after that. He was struggling, thrown left and right, blind. Water shot past him, smashed into his face, pulverized him from above. He dug down, using a forward sweep to turn the boat, missing a black boulder with vicious, razor-sharp edges by a matter of inches. The green canopy spun around him. The trees had all blurred into one another. He couldn't hear. His ears were full of water, and when he opened his mouth, gasping for air, water rushed into the back of his throat. Two more sweep strokes, dodging the rocks, then a terrible crash as the kayak slammed into one of the shelves. Mercifully, it stayed in one piece. A huge blanket of water fell on him. He was drowning. He had gone under.

But then suddenly, somehow, he was through. He felt battered and exhausted as if he had just been in hand-to-hand combat with the river, which, in a sense, he had. His stomach and back were on fire where the broken edges had cut into him. Alex slid a hand under the sodden rag that was his shirt and felt the damage. When he took it out, his fingers were bloody. Behind him, the white water leapt and hurled itself against the rocks, displaying its fury that the kayak had gotten through.

Alex knew that he wouldn't be able to take much more. It was only desperation—and pure luck—that had brought him this far. From the moment he had entered the white water, he had lost all sense of his center of gravity, which really meant that he had lost everything. He might as well have been a piece of driftwood, being swept no matter where. It wasn't just that the kayak was the wrong shape. It wasn't a kayak at all. It was a float ripped off a seaplane, and if Alex had decided, after all, to steal a coffin for the journey, he doubted he would have had any less control.

He tried to remember what Dr. Tanner had told him about the river. After the first rapids, it got worse. And then, a mile downstream, came something called the Bora Falls. Alex didn't like the sound of that. He would have to find somewhere to come ashore and take his chances in the rain forest. He had already covered a certain amount of ground. With a bit of luck he might even have

reached the edge of the floodplain on the other side. There had to be some civilization somewhere in the area; a ranger, a flying doctor, somebody! Somehow he would find them.

But there was still nowhere to land. The banks climbed steeply, with rocks forming an almost-permanent barrier. When Alex looked up, the tops of the trees seemed a long way away. As wet as he was, Alex wasn't cold. The rain forest throbbed with its own muddy heat. He was moving swiftly, still being swept along by the current. He was listening for the next stretch of rapids—but that wasn't what he heard. Instead, it was the last thing he had expected.

A helicopter.

If he had still been in the rapids, he wouldn't even have been able to hear the chatter of the blades, but right now he was in one of the straits, where the water was fast-moving but silent. Even so, he had to look up to make sure he wasn't imagining it. Somehow it seemed unlikely, early in the morning, in the middle of an Australian rain forest. But there it was. It was still a small speck, some distance behind, but drawing nearer with every second.

Alex's first thought was that MI6 had finally arrived, almost when it was too late. He looked back a second time and felt his hopes shrivel and die. There was something mean and sinister about the helicopter, the way it was zeroing in on him like an insect about to sting. If MI6 were coming, they would have been here days ago. No. This was something else. And it wasn't on his side.

The helicopter was a Bell UH-1D, also known as a "Huey," one of the most famous flying machines in the world ever since the Americans had sent hundreds of them to Vietnam back in the sixties. Alex recognized the long, slim fuselage with the extended tail. The cargo door was open and there was a man sitting with his legs hanging out and some sort of weapon on his lap. It had to be nothing more than bad luck. Dr. Tanner couldn't have called up support in the few minutes that Alex had been gone. The helicopter must have been on its way anyway, perhaps dropping off supplies, and Tanner had simply redirected it after him.

Alex had nowhere to hide. He was in the middle of the river, and he wasn't moving fast enough to get away. At least the helicopter didn't seem to be equipped with door guns, rocket launchers, or antitank missiles. And the man only had a rifle. That was good too. If it had been a machine gun, Alex would have had no chance at all. But even so, a half-decent marksman would be able to pick him off with no trouble. Suddenly Alex's back and shoulders felt horribly exposed. He could almost feel the first bullet slamming into them.

He lowered his head toward the water, changing his center of gravity and tilting the float onto its side. His left shoulder was touching the water now as he lanced forward, pounding down with the paddle, heading for the nearest bank. It was a technique known as the low brace, and Alex hoped that as well as giving him extra momentum through the water, it would also present less of a target to the sniper above.

Something snapped against the surface inches from his head, and a microsecond later, he heard the discharge of the rifle. The bullet had reached him faster than its sound. Alex jerked upright again. Water dripped off the side of his face. But he had reached his destination, a clump of trees hanging over the river, forming a green tunnel for him to go through. At least he would be out of sight for the next few seconds.

The next stretch of white water was about fifty yards in front of him, directly ahead. The rapids had

been his enemy, but now, in a strange way, they had become his friend. The churning water, the current spinning him, and the waves tossing him from side to side would make him more difficult to hit. But could he reach them? The helicopter was directly above. The leaves and branches were thrashing around madly, tearing themselves apart. The downdraft was beating at the river, and the howl of the Huey's engine was shattering the very air.

Alex emerged from the tunnel and dug down, using all the strength of his upper body and shoulders, propelling himself forward. There were two more shots. One of them hit the kayak, and Alex found himself staring at a hole, right in front of him. It had been fired at an angle, boring through the fiberglass and exiting just above the waterline. It must have missed his leg with barely an inch to spare.

Left and then right, two more power strokes and he was into the rapids. He hadn't had time to pick a line—or to form any strategy for surviving the next section. And this stretch was even worse than the first one had been, with faster water, a bigger slope, rocks that seemed purposely built to impale him or tear him in half.

Even the sniper seemed to hesitate, letting the river do its work for him. "*When in doubt, keep paddling.*" That was another of Ian Rider's instructions, and Alex did just that, swinging the paddle automatically, first on one side, then the other, battling his way through. The helicopter had gone from sight. The spray had wiped it out. Surely that meant they couldn't see him. There was an earsplitting bang, but it wasn't the rifle. The nose of the kayak had slammed into a rock, jerking Alex around in a crazy circle, so that for the next few seconds he found himself traveling down the river backward. He jammed the paddle in, using the current to turn him. His arms were almost torn off by the strain, but the boat came around, then shot forward. All the water in the world fell on him. But then, like before, it was over. He was through.

Ahead of him, the river was wider, and this time the vegetation was set farther back, providing no cover. The kayak was being carried rapidly. In fact, the river seemed to be moving faster and faster. Why? Alex had no time to find an answer. He heard the thudding of the rotors, glanced up, and saw the sniper taking aim. He was so close that Alex could make out the stubble on his chin, the finger closing on the trigger.

There was only one thing he could do, one last trick he could play. It might easily kill him, but Alex was fighting back. He wasn't just going to sit there and let this man gun him down.

The sniper fired. Alex felt the bullet crease the side of his neck, just above his shoulder. He wanted to scream. It was as if someone had purposefully drawn a kitchen knife across his flesh. But at the same exact moment, he took a deep breath, threw himself sideways, jerked up a knee, and turned the kayak upside down.

He wanted the sniper and the helicopter pilot to think that they had gotten him. From the air, all they would be able to see was the upturned hull of the kayak. Alex was dangling beneath, his face and shoulders buffeted by the current, the paddle gripped tightly in his hands. He was still traveling very fast. If he hit a rock, he would be killed. It was as simple as that. But it was either that or a bullet from above.

For Alex, the next minute was the longest of his life. He could feel himself moving, but he could see nothing. When he tried to look, everything was a swirl of dark gray, and the water beat against his

eyes. He could hear strange echoes of the river and, far away, the helicopter hovering in the air. His legs were trapped, locked above his head inside the kayak. His heart was pounding. His lungs were beginning to demand fresh air.

But he had to stay underwater. How long would the helicopter follow him before the pilot decided that his work was done? His chest was getting tighter. There were bubbles escaping from his mouth and ears, precious oxygen leaking out of him. He had no idea how long he had been submerged. He felt the kayak hit something, sending a shudder down his spine. This was madness. He was drowning. If he waited much longer, he wouldn't have the strength to flip himself back up.

At last, at the very end of his endurance, on the edge of a blackout, he acted. The move was called the hip snap. Alex curled his face into his body and pushed with the paddle. At the same time, he rolled his hips, forcing the kayak to turn. Everything happened at once. His head and shoulders cleared the surface, water streaming down his face. Daylight burst all around him. The kayak swayed, then righted itself. Gasping, dazed, Alex found himself in the middle of the river, moving faster than ever.

And he was alone. The helicopter had gone. He could hear it fading into the distance behind him. So it had worked. They thought he was dead.

Alex looked ahead of him. And saw that he was.

Now he understood why they had left him. It wouldn't have mattered if he was still alive underneath the kayak because what lay in front of him would kill him anyway. He had reached the Bora Falls.

A straight line that marked the end of the world. The river was rushing over it...hundreds, thousands of gallons. There was a white cloud, a mist hanging over the abyss. And beyond that nothing. He could hear the water thundering down endlessly and knew that there could be no going back. There was no power on earth that could stop him now.

Alex Rider opened his mouth and yelled as the kayak was swept helplessly over the edge.

BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED

FOR A LONG, DRAWN-OUT second, he hung in space with the roar of the Bora Falls in his ears, the spray in his eyes, and the certain knowledge in his mind that he couldn't possibly survive. The water was like some huge living thing—rushing and exploding over the side of the rock face. And there would be no safe landing. Looking down, Alex saw a boiling cauldron, fifty yards below, waiting to receive him.

There was no time to think, no time to do anything but react instinctively, half remembering lessons taught long ago. Somehow he had to lessen the impact when he hit the surface below. Be aggressive! Don't let the waterfall just take you. At the very last moment, as he began to fall, Alex tensed himself, took a deep breath, and then paddled hard with a single, powerful stroke.

The world tilted.

The roar in his ears was deafening. He was blind. His head was being hammered. He was only aware of his hands, gripping the paddle, the wrists locked, his muscles seizing up.

Lean forward. You don't want to fight the water—you have to go with it. The higher the drop, the more angle you'll need when you hit the bottom. And—he remembered when it was almost too late—turn your head to one side or the impact will smash every bone in your face.

Falling. Half in the water, half in the air. Faster and faster.

Try to aim for the white. That's where there's the most air in the water, and the air will cushion your fall. Don't shout. You have to hold that breath.

How much farther could it be? And how deep was the basin? God—he would be smashed to pieces if he hit a rock. Too late to worry about that now. He closed his eyes. Why watch his own death?

The kayak hit the cauldron nose first and was instantly sucked inside. Alex's legs and stomach took the full force of the impact before the water overwhelmed him. It pounded down on his shoulders, crushing him. His head was thrown back, and he felt the whiplash twist his neck. The paddle was torn free. And then he was floundering, scrabbling desperately with his hands, trying to free himself from the kayak, which was now dragging him into the depths below. His elbow struck a rock, almost breaking the bone. The shock made him release his breath, and he knew he had only seconds to reach the surface. But his legs were trapped. He couldn't pull them free. The kayak was sinking, taking him with it. Using all his strength, he twisted his lower body, and somehow his hips cleared the edge of the kayak. He pulled. First one leg, then the other. He was swallowing water. He no longer knew which way was up and which was down. His feet were free. He lashed out once and then again. The water spun him, throwing him violently from side to side. He couldn't take any more. One last try...

His head and shoulders burst up into the air. He was already far downstream. The Bora Falls were behind him, impossibly high. There was no sign of the kayak. It had surely been smashed to pieces. But as Alex sucked in fresh air, he knew that he had done everything right and that by a miracle he had survived. He had taken on the falls and he had beaten them.

The current had slowed down. Alex's arms and legs were completely limp. All his strength had gone, and the best he could manage was to keep himself afloat, tilting his head back so that his mouth stayed in the air. He felt as if he had swallowed a gallon of water and vaguely wondered about cholera, yellow fever, or whatever else this tropical river might contain. ASIS hadn't bothered giving him any injections before he flew to Bangkok.

How far had he traveled? Dr. Tanner had said that the falls were a mile from the camp but he felt he had gone twice that distance. No sign of the helicopter, though. That was a good thing. They thought he was dead. So they'd leave him alone. He had never felt so weary. The water was now a cushion, and he wanted to lie back and sleep.

Some time later, he found himself lying on a riverbank made up of gravel and sand. He had been washed up without even noticing it and must have nodded off since the sun was now high in the sky. He allowed the warmth to creep into him. As far as he could tell, none of his limbs were broken. His neck and back were bruised and hurting—his spine had taken the full force of the impact—and there were cuts and scratches all over his waist, his hips, and his legs. But he knew he had gotten off lightly. The chances of his surviving the waterfall must have been about fifty to one...but to have done so without a major injury would have been considerably less. He remembered what Ash had told him about his father. The luck of the devil. Well, that was something Alex seemed to have inherited.

Ash.

Reef Island.

The tsunami heading for Western Australia.

For the last few days, Alex had been so worried about himself that he had lost sight of the bigger picture. How long did he have left before Major Yu set off the bomb that was going to have such a devastating effect on the earth's tectonic plates? Was he already too late? Alex forced himself into a sitting position, warming himself in the sun and trying to get life back into his battered frame. At the same time, he worked it out. Yu had spoken of three days. At midnight the earth was going to be in the grip of some sort of gravitational pull and the fault line deep down in the seabed would be at its most vulnerable.

Three days. Alex had spent two of them as a prisoner in the hospital compound. So it was going to happen today! Right now it couldn't be much later than ten or eleven o'clock in the morning. So Alex had only twelve hours to prevent a terrible catastrophe, the murder of eight people on Reef Island and the deaths of thousands more in Australia.

And that was when the complete hopelessness of his situation hit him. It was true that he had managed to escape from the horrific death Major Yu had planned for him. But where was he? Looking around him, Alex saw that he had left the rain forest behind him. He was on the edge of a floodplain with mountains in the far distance, perhaps thirty miles away. He was surrounded by stubby, dwarflike trees that he couldn't name, a few boulders, and some termite mounds. There was a sweet smell—something like moldering wood—in the air. And that was all. If nowhere had a middle, this was it.

There was nothing he could do. Nobody was going to operate on him, but he would die anyway—either from starvation or disease. Assuming, of course, that a saltwater crocodile or a snake didn't get him first. Alex wiped a grimy hand across his face. It seemed to him that from the moment this

mission had begun, nothing had gone right. He had never been in control. He cast his mind back to the office in Sydney and Ethan Brooke outlining what he would have to do. He was there to provide cover, that was all. It was going to be easy. Instead of which, he had been thrown into the worst two weeks of his life. God! He should have listened to Jack Starbright!

He looked again at the mountains. It would take him forty-eight hours to reach them at the very least. Too long. And why should he assume anyone lived there? He hadn't seen any roads or houses from the plane. If only he could get in touch with MI6. He glanced at his wrist. Miraculously, despite the battering it had taken, the watch was still in place. The question was—why hadn't it worked? Smithers had built it for him personally. The watch *must* be sending out a signal. So what possible reason could MI6 have to ignore it? Alex remembered his meeting with Mrs. Jones and Ben Daniels—Fox, as he had once been known. Alex couldn't believe that the SAS man would let him down. So what had gone wrong?

He took the watch off and examined it. Although it looked cheap and tacky, like something he might have gotten in a street market in Afghanistan, the watch would have been built to last. The strap must have been strong to survive the journey over the Bora Falls, and Alex guessed the case would be waterproof. The hands were still showing eleven o'clock. Alex turned it over. There was a groove going all the way around the underside. He realized that the back must screw off. He pressed his thumb against it and twisted. The case opened with surprising ease.

The watch contained some complicated microcircuitry that Smithers must have designed and installed. It was completely dry. There was no evidence of any water seeping in. The whole thing was powered by a battery, which should have been sitting in a circular compartment, right in the middle.

But there was no battery. The compartment was empty.

So that was the answer, the reason why his signal hadn't been heard. There had been no signal. But how could it have happened? Smithers had always been on his side. It was completely unlike him to forget something so basic. Alex had to fight back a wave of fury. His whole life snatched away from him simply because of a missing battery!

For a moment, Alex was tempted to fling the watch into the river. He never wanted to see the wretched thing again.

For a long time he didn't move. He let the sun beat down on him, drying out his clothes. A few flies buzzed around his face, but he ignored them. He found himself playing back everything that had happened to him...the waterfall, the flight through the rapids, the moment he had set the hospital ablaze. Had it really all been for nothing? And before that, his dinner with Major Yu, the chase on the *Liberian Star*, the discovery of Royal Blue, the toy warehouse in Jakarta, and the arrival of Kopassus.

No battery!

He remembered his time in Bangkok with Ash and the story he had been told about his father in Malta. That was the only reason he had agreed to all this, to learn something about himself. Had it been worth it? Probably not. The truth was that Ash had disappointed him. His godfather. Alex had hoped he would have been more of a friend, but despite all the time they had spent together, he had never really gotten to know him. Ash was too much of a mystery—and from the very start he had set

out to trick Alex. That business on the beach in Perth.

He remembered his first sight of Ash, dressed as a soldier and carrying an assault rifle, looming out of the darkness as Alex stood on a fake mine in the middle of a fake barrage. How could they have done that to him? It had all been a test.

“You weren’t in any real danger. We knew exactly where you were all the time.”

That was what Ash had told him that first night at the Peninsula Hotel, sitting out at the swimming pool. Alex remembered it now.

And how had they known?

“There was a beacon inside the heel of one of your sneakers.”

His sneakers.

Alex looked down at them. All the color had faded, and they were ragged, full of holes. Was it possible, what he was thinking? Could it possibly be true? Alex had been given the sneakers when he was on the aircraft carrier that had picked him up when he first landed in Australia. The beacon had been added by Colonel Abbott when he was staying with the SAS in Swanbourne.

He was wearing the same sneakers now.

He had been given a complete change of clothes by Cloudy Webber when she had dressed him as an Afghan—but the shoes hadn’t fit him, so she had allowed him to keep his own. He hadn’t changed again until his dinner with Major Yu. He had worn the English designer shirt and jeans until he had arrived at the hospital. There had been fresh clothes in his room. But neither Major Yu nor Dr. Tanner had provided him with new footwear. So the beacon that he had been given in Swanbourne must still be on him. It wouldn’t be working. It had been designed for short-range use.

But it might be battery-operated.

Alex fought back the surge of excitement. He was too afraid of being disappointed. He leaned down and pulled the sneakers off so that he could examine them. If there was a tracking device, it would have to be buried in one of the heels. There was nowhere else to hide it. Alex turned the shoes over. The soles were made of rubber, and he couldn’t see any openings or anything that looked like a secret compartment. He pulled out the insoles. And that was when he found it. It was in the left shoe, directly over the heel: a flap that had been cut into the fabric and then sealed.

It took Alex ten minutes to get it open, using his fingers, his teeth, and a sharp stone from the riverbank. As he worked, he knew that this might all be for nothing. The battery had been there for two weeks. It might be dead. It surely wouldn’t fit the transmitter in the watch anyway. But the chances of finding a second battery in the Australian outback had been zero to begin with. Alex found it hard to believe that he had been carrying it all the time.

He pulled open the flap and there it was—the little pack of circuitry that had been designed to save his life during the bombardment in Swanbourne. And there was the power source too, a straightforward lithium battery, about twice the size of the one that should have been fitted into the watch. Alex eased it out and held it in the palm of his hand as if it were a nugget of pure gold. All he had to do was connect it. He had no screwdriver, no conductor, no metal contacts, nothing. Easy!

In the end, he broke two spikes off a nearby shrub and used them as miniature tweezers to pry out

some of the wires from inside the heel of the shoe. It seemed to take forever, and as the sun climbed higher, he felt the sweat trickling down his forehead, but he didn't stop to rest. Painstakingly, he unstitched the inside of the radio beacon until he had two lengths of wire, each one barely more than an inch long. Did the battery still have any life? He rubbed the wires against it, and to his delight, he was rewarded by a tiny spark. So now all he had to do was connect the battery to the watch, using a couple of pebbles to keep everything in place. There really was nothing more he could do. He set the battery next to the watch with the wires trailing inside, the two of them feeding precious electricity into the transmitter, and balanced the entire thing on a rock. After that, he went and lay down in the shadow of a tree. Either the transmitter was working now or it wasn't. He would find out soon enough.

A few minutes later he was sound asleep.

ATTACK FORCE

ALEX WAS WOKEN BY the sound of a helicopter. For a moment he was filled with dread, fearing that the Bell UH-1D had returned. If that were the case, he would let them take him. He simply didn't have in him to fight anymore. There was nothing left with which to fight back. But squinting into the sun, he saw at once that this was a bigger helicopter with two sets of rotors: a Chinook. And there was a figure already leaning out of the front door.

Blue eyes. Short black hair. A handsome, slightly boyish face. It was Ben Daniels.

Alex clambered to his feet as the Chinook landed on a patch of scrubland a short distance away. He went over to it, taking care where he put his bare feet. It would be just his luck to step on a death adder now! Ben stepped out and stared at him.

"So here you are!" he exclaimed, shouting over the noise of the helicopter rotors. "We were getting worried about you!" He shook his head in disbelief. "What on earth are you doing out here? Where have you been?"

"It's a long story," Alex said.

"Has it got anything to do with the smoke coming from upriver?" Ben jerked a thumb. "We saw it as we flew in."

"That used to be a hospital." Alex couldn't hide his delight that things were finally going his way. "I'm really glad to see you..."

"Mrs. Jones has been frantic. We knew you'd flown to Jakarta, but we lost you after that. She's got people all over Indonesia, but she sent me to Darwin in case you made it across. I've been waiting there for three days, hoping you'd get in touch. You look terrible! Like something the cat dragged in..."

"That's how I feel." Alex stopped. "What time is it, Ben?" he asked.

Ben was obviously surprised by the question. He looked at his watch. "It's ten past one. Why do you ask?"

"We have to get moving. We've got less than twelve hours."

"Until what?"

"I'll tell you on the way..."

Alex was feeling a lot better than he had in a long time. He was warm and dry and well fed, and all the dangers of the last few days had slipped away behind him. He was lying on a comfortable bunk in a military compound just outside Darwin, which was where Ben Daniels had brought him earlier that day. He was wearing combat fatigues, the only clothes Ben had been able to find for him. For the last few hours he had been left on his own.

He could see a certain amount of activity outside the window. Soldiers crossing the parade ground, jeeps speeding in and out of the main gate. The helicopter was still sitting where it landed. Half an hour ago, a gas truck had pulled up and Alex had watched as refueling began. He wondered if it was significant. Maybe something was happening at last.

Despite everything, he couldn't relax completely. It was six thirty, and very soon the sun would be setting, at the same time moving into the alignment with the earth and the moon that Major Yu had been waiting for. At midnight, Royal Blue would be lowered to the seabed and detonated. The devastation would begin.

And what were MI6 or ASIS doing to prevent it?

Alex had explained everything...not just to Ben but to a whole posse of Australian army officers. His story was incredible, almost beyond belief, but the strange thing was that not one person in the room had doubted him. This was, after all, the boy who had dropped in from outer space. Alex supposed that where he was concerned, anything was now considered possible. One of the men was a technical adviser, and he had quickly confirmed what Major Yu had said. It would be possible to manufacture an artificial tsunami. From midnight onward, the fault line would be in the grip of enormous gravitational pressure. Even a relatively small explosion would be enough to trigger a global catastrophe, and Yu had all the power of Royal Blue at his command.

Of course, in one sense Scorpia's mission had already failed. Thanks to Alex, the intelligence agencies knew what Scorpia were planning, and even if everyone on Reef Island were killed in a freak wave, nobody would now think it was an accident. Alex assumed that the island would be evacuated anyway, just to be on the safe side. There was no longer any need for Major Yu to press the button. If he was sensible, he'd already be looking for somewhere to hide.

There was a knock on the door. Alex straightened up as Ben Daniels entered. He was looking grim.

"They want you," he said.

"Who?"

"The cavalry's just arrived. They're in the mess hall..."

Alex walked across the compound with Daniels, wondering what had gone wrong. But at least he was grateful he was still being included. MI6 had always treated him as a spy one minute, a schoolboy the next, dumping him out of the way whenever it suited them.

The mess hall was a low wooden building running the full length of the square. With Daniels right behind him, Alex opened the door and went in.

Most of the officers he had spoken to earlier that day were still there, poring over maps and sea charts that had been spread out over the dining tables. They had been joined by two men that Alex recognized at once. This was the cavalry that Ben had referred to. Ethan Brooke was sitting at a table, with Marc Damon standing just behind him. Presumably they had been flown up from Sydney. Garth—the guide dog—saw Alex come in and thumped his tail. At least someone was pleased to see him.

"Alex!" The blind man had become aware of his presence. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay." Alex wasn't sure he was too happy to see the head of ASIS—Covert Action. Ethan Brooke had manipulated him as cold-bloodedly as Alan Blunt would have in London. It seemed to

him that all these people were of a type.

“I know what you’ve been through. I can’t believe the way things played out. But you did a fantastic job.”

“Major Yu knew about me all the time,” Alex said. Even as he spoke the words, he knew they were true. The fight in Bangkok had been designed to cripple him. And on the *Liberian Star*, Alex had overheard Yu boasting to the captain. He had known Alex’s identity before he entered the container. He has simply been playing with him, for his own amusement.

“Yes. We have a security leak, and it’s worse than we thought.” Brooke glanced in the direction of his deputy, who looked away, as if he didn’t want to make any comment.

“What’s happened to Ash?” Alex asked.

“We don’t know. We only know what you told us.” Brooke fell silent, and Alex could see he was preparing himself for what he had to say.

“So what are you going to do?” Alex asked.

“We have a problem, Alex,” Brooke explained. “Here’s the situation...I’ll give it to you straight. The first thing is, the Reef Island conference is still going ahead.”

“Why?” Alex was shocked.

“We told them they were in danger. Obviously, we couldn’t give them all the details, but we suggested they pack their bags and get out of there in the strongest-possible terms. They refused. They said that if they left, they’d look like cowards. Tomorrow’s their main press conference, and how’s it going to look if they’ve all skulked away overnight? We’re still arguing with them, but in a way, I suppose they’ve got a point. Scorpia wanted them out of the picture. If they simply disappeared, they’d be doing the job for them.”

Alex took this in. It was bad news—but Reef Encounter was only part of the picture. After the tsunami hit the island, it would continue on its way toward Western Australia.

“Have you found Major Yu?” he asked.

“Yes.” Brooke smiled briefly. “He told you he was on an oil platform in the Timor Sea, and we’ve gone through all the records, including the latest satellite images. There’s an oil rig licensed to the Chada Trading Agency in Bangkok. It’s a semi-submersible platform moored in four thousand feet of water a hundred miles north of Reef Island.”

“Right in the subduction zone,” Damon muttered. It was the first time he had spoken since Alex came into the room. “It’s called Dragon Nine.”

“So that’s it,” Alex said. It seemed obvious to him. “You bomb it. Blow it out of the water. Kill Major Yu and everyone who works for him.”

“I’d love to do just that,” Brooke replied. “But first of all, Dragon Nine is just outside Australian waters. It’s in Indonesian territory. If I send a strike against it, I might accidentally start a war. It seems I can’t even send one man in a boat without written authority, and that could take days. Officially, we’re stuck...”

“Why can’t you ask the Indonesians for help?”

“They don’t trust us. By the time we’ve persuaded them we’re telling the truth, it’ll be too late.”

“So you’re just going to sit back and let him get on with it?” Alex couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Obviously not. Why do you think we’re here?”

Ben Daniels took a step forward. “Why don’t you tell Scorpia that you know what they’re up to?” he asked. “You said it just now. The plan only worked if we all thought the tsunami was caused naturally. If we tell them they’ve failed, maybe they’ll back off.”

“We’ve already tried,” Damon replied. “But Dragon Nine has shut down. It’s observing radio silence. And even if we did find a way to contact Major Yu, he might go ahead anyway. Why not? He’s obviously mad. And if the bomb’s already in place...”

“So what is the answer, Mr. Brooke?” one of the other officers asked.

“A small British-Australian task force. Unauthorized and illegal.” Brooke turned to Alex. “I’ve already spoken to your Mrs. Jones and she’s agreed. We have very little time, but I’ve assembled some of our best people. They’re getting equipped right now. You and Daniels go with them. We parachute you onto the oil rig. You find Royal Blue and deactivate it. Meanwhile, my people kill Major Yu. If you can locate the whereabouts of Ash, so much the better—but he’s not a priority. What do you say?”

Alex was too shocked to say anything, but next to him, Ben Daniels shook his head. “I’m happy to go,” he said. “But you can’t be serious, asking Alex. He’s only a kid, if you hadn’t noticed. And I’d have said he’s already done enough.”

Some of the Australian officers nodded in agreement, but Brooke wasn’t having any of it. “We can’t do it without Alex,” he said simply.

And Alex knew he was right. He had already told them what he had done on board the *Liberian Star*: the bomb and the scanning equipment. “I scanned my fingerprints into Royal Blue,” he said. “I’m the only one who can deactivate it.” He sighed. It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

“I’ll expect you to look after him, Mr. Daniels,” Brooke continued. “But we don’t have a lot of time to argue about this. It’s already seven o’clock, and it’s a two-hour trip.” He turned to Alex. “So, Alex. What do you say?”

Two men and a woman were watching the sun set on Reef Island.

The island was only a quarter of a mile long, but it was strikingly beautiful with white beaches, deep green palm trees, and a turquoise sea...all the colors somehow too vivid to be quite real. The north side of the island rose up, with limestone cliffs covered in vegetation and mangroves below. Here sea eagles circled and monkeys chattered in the trees. But on the southern side, everything was calm and flat. There was a wooden table and a bench on the sand. But no deck chairs, no sun umbrellas, no Coke bottles or anything that might suggest that, just over the horizon, the twenty-first century was ticking on.

There was only one building on Reef Island, a long wooden house with a thatched roof, partly on stilts. Normally, there were no generators. The only electricity was supplied by wind or water

power. A large organic garden provided all the food. The owner of the house ate fish but not meat. A few cows, grazing in a field, were milked twice a day. There were chickens to lay eggs. An elderly goat, wandering free, was no use at all, but it had been there so long that nobody had the heart to ask it to leave.

In the last few days, the island had been invaded by a press corps, which had established itself in a series of tentlike structures behind the house. The journalists had brought their own generators. And meat. And alcohol. And everything else they would need for the press conference the next day. They were enjoying themselves. It was nice to be able to report a story that people actually wanted to hear. And the weather during the last week had been perfect.

The woman on the beach was the actress—Eve Taylor—who owned the island. She had made quite a lot of bad films and one or two good ones, and she didn't really care which was which. They all paid the same. One of the men was an American multimillionaire...a billionaire, in fact, although in recent years he had given much of his wealth away. The other man was the pop singer Rob Goldman, who had just returned from his tour of Australia.

“ASIS are still insisting we should leave,” Goldman was saying. “They say we could all be killed.”

“Have they explained the nature of the threat?” the millionaire asked.

“No. But they sounded serious.”

“Of course they did.” The actress let sand run through her fingers. “They want us to go. This is a trick. They're just trying to scare us.”

“I don't think so, Eve,” Goldman said.

Eve Taylor gazed at the horizon. “We're safe,” she said. “Look how beautiful it is. Look at the sea! That's part of the reason we're here. To protect all this for the next generation. I don't care if there's danger. I'm not going to run away.” She turned to the billionaire. “Jason?”

The man shook his head. “I'm with you,” he said. “I never ran away from anything in my life and I'm not starting now.”

Three hundred miles farther south, in the cities of Derby, Broome, and Port Headland, thousands of people were watching the same sunset. Some of them were on their way home from work. Some were tucking children into bed. In pubs, in cars, on the beaches, wherever...they were simply edging toward the end of another day.

And none of them knew that inch by inch, the bomb known as Royal Blue was already making its way down the pipe that would carry it to the seabed and below. That the sun and the moon were moving, inexorably, into an alignment that wouldn't happen again for another century. And that a madman was waiting to press the button that would unleash chaos on the world.

Five hours until midnight.

And in an army camp south of Darwin, Alex Rider gave his answer and the final preparations began.

DRAGON NINE

ETHAN **B**ROOKE HAD HANDPICKED ten soldiers from the Australian SAS for his assault team, and at least some of them needed no introduction. As Alex joined them in the hanger that was going to be used as a briefing room, he saw Scooter, Texas, X-Ray, and Sparks waiting for him, and suddenly he was back where this had all begun, on the beach near Swanbourne. He wasn't sure if he should be glad or annoyed to meet up with them again.

Scooter was equally uncomfortable. "I'm really sorry about that trick we pulled on you, Alex," he said. "We all felt bad about it. But we had our orders..."

"Colonel Abbott asked us to pass on a message," Texas added. "No hard feelings. And if you ever come back to Swanbourne, we'll throw a proper Aussie barbecue."

"With no hand grenades," Alex muttered.

"You got it."

Alex looked at the other soldiers. None of them seemed to be older than twenty-four or twenty-five, meaning there was an age gap of just ten years between him and them. Maybe that was why all of them had accepted him. Like Alex, they had changed into night combat gear. A couple of them carried balaclavas. The rest had painted their hands and faces black.

The hanger was vast and empty. A blackboard had been placed in the middle with a row of metal benches. Alex sat down next to Ben. The others took their places with Scooter facing them in front of the board. Once again, he seemed to be in charge. Scooter was looking tired. He seemed to have grown a lot older since Swanbourne—or maybe it was just that he knew how much was at stake. "We haven't got a lot of time," he began. "Nor do we have much of a plan...so this won't take long."

"We're parachuting in from about eight thousand feet. I know a boat would have been easier and less conspicuous, but by the time we got there it would all be over. Anyway, it's always possible our friend Major Yu has radar."

He turned to the blackboard. Someone had taped up what could have been an engineer's drawing of two oil rigs—one square, the other triangular, joined by a narrow bridge. Each of the rigs had three cranes and one of them had a helicopter pad, represented by a square in a circle. Scooter picked up a stick, which he used as a pointer.

"All right—listen up!" He tapped the picture. "This is what we *think* Dragon Nine looks like. We don't *know* because we don't have any pictures and we haven't had enough time to take any. All I can tell you for certain is that it's a semi-submersible platform, which means that basically the whole thing floats on the surface of the water, connected to the seabed by a dozen steel tendrils.

In case you're wondering, each one of them is about a mile long."

"What happens if they break?" someone asked.

"Nothing much. The whole thing will float away, like a ship without an anchor. At least that's

something we don't have to worry about." He pointed again. "The processing platform is on the left. Dragon Nine isn't in production, so the whole area will be quiet—and that's where we're going to start. We'll land on the helicopter pad. You'll recognize it because it's got this big letter H..."

Scooter turned his attention to the square-shaped rig.

"This is the drilling platform," he continued. "Once we've assembled and checked everyone's there, we'll make our way across the bridge, heading for the main derrick...that's the metal tower over the well hole. And that's where we're going to find Royal Blue. Our friend Major Yu will be using some sort of system—maybe guide wires—to lower it down to the seabed."

"So let's blow it up," X-Ray growled.

"It's our first target," Scooter agreed. "The power unit will be our second. But we can't take anything for granted. Yu could just as easily be using a submarine to take the bomb down. That's why Alex is here. Our job is to find the control room and get him there. He can deactivate Royal Blue—but no one else can, so if he gets shot we might as well pack up and go home. You hear what I'm saying? I want you to watch his back. And his front and his sides."

Alex glanced down. He understood what Scooter was saying and why he had to say it, but he still didn't like being picked out in this way.

"I'm afraid this mission isn't as easy as it seems," Scooter continued, although Alex wouldn't have said it looked simple to begin with. "We've got no idea where the control room is. There are five different levels, two separate platforms. Yu could be on either. You've got to think of Dragon Nine as two metal cities. They've got their own storage depots, dormitories, mess halls, and recreation rooms as well as fuel tanks, desalination units, pump rooms, engineering blocks, and all the rest of it. Somehow we have to find our way through all that until we find what we're looking for. Then we have to deal with Royal Blue. And when we start, it's possible that we're going to be spread out all over the place. We're lucky that there's not too much breeze, but there's no moon. Just try not to fall into the sea."

He paused. Eleven silent faces watched him from the two rows of benches. Alex could feel the clock already ticking. He wanted to be out and away.

"So what do we have on our side?" Scooter asked. "Well, first there's the element of surprise. Major Yu thinks he killed Alex, so he'll have no idea we're on our way. And also, there's the question of timing." He looked at his watch. "Yu can't detonate the bomb whenever he likes. He's tied into the one hour starting at midnight. That's when the earth, sun, and moon are going to be in the right position. It's nine o'clock now, and we're only two hours from drop-off. That means we'll have one hour plus to find Royal Blue before he can throw the switch. And there's something else we know, thanks to Alex. The bomb can only remain at depth for twenty minutes. So it's not there yet. And if all goes well, it never will be."

He looked around.

"Any questions?"

There were none.

"We've got to move quickly and quietly," he concluded. "Take out as many of Yu's people as we can before they know we're there. Leave the guns and grenades for as long as possible. Use your

knives. And find the control room! That's what this is all about."

He set down the pointer.

"Let's go."

Everyone stood up. Ben had Alex's parachute—black silk, for a night drop. He'd packed it himself before the briefing, and now he helped Alex put it on, pulling the straps tight across his chest and around his thighs.

"It's probably a bit too late to ask you this," he muttered. "But have you ever parachuted before?"

"Only once," Alex admitted. That had been eight months ago. Alex had landed on the roof of the Science Museum in London. But he decided not to go into all that right now.

"Well, don't worry if you miss the target," Ben said. "The sea's warm. Conditions are perfect. And with a bit of luck, there won't be too many sharks."

The Australian SAS men were already moving. Ben strapped on his own parachute, and the two of them followed the others out of the hangar. There was a helicopter waiting for them on the tarmac—the same one that had picked Alex up in the jungle. The Chinook CH-47 was the ideal machine for this night's work. Often used to ferry troops or supplies, its wide rear exit was also perfect for parachute drops. It would fly them to the target at 190 miles per hour and at an altitude no higher than 8,500 feet. That wouldn't leave long to deploy the chute.

Ben must have been reading his thoughts. "We're using static line," he said. The static-line deployment system meant that they wouldn't have to pull a rip cord. The parachutes would open automatically.

Alex nodded. His mouth was suddenly too dry to speak.

They climbed in the back. In the jungle, Alex had used a door just behind the cockpit, but this time the whole rear section of the Chinook had been opened, forming a ramp big enough to take a jeep. Alex looked in. The pilot and the co-pilot were already in their seats. There was a third man, a flight engineer, cradling a 7.62-millimeter M60 general-purpose machine gun, which must have been bolted on at some time during the day. Alex hoped it wouldn't be needed.

The twelve of them took their places. There was a long row of seats facing each other on either side of the fuselage. Although they were made of canvas stretched over metal, they reminded Alex a little of dining room chairs. Normally, the Chinook carries thirty-three men, so at least there was plenty of room. Alex sat next to Ben. It was clear that everyone expected them to stick together—although how they would manage that, parachuting out into the night, was something they hadn't discussed. Scooter leaned over and clipped Alex's rip cord to a silver rail running all the way to the cockpit. The pilot pressed a switch and slowly the rear door closed. A red light flashed on, the helicopter lurched off the ground, and moments later, they were on their way.

It was already dark, and there was nothing to see out of the windows, which were too small anyway to provide much of a view. Alex could only tell their height from the feeling in his stomach and the pressure in his ears. The SAS men were sitting silently, some of them checking their weapons—machine guns, pistols with silencers attached, and a wide variety of vicious-looking combat knives. Next to him, Ben Daniels had nodded off to sleep. Alex guessed he'd be well practiced at taking a catnap whenever he needed it, conserving his strength.

But Alex couldn't sleep. He was in a Chinook helicopter with the Australian SAS, on his way to attack an oil rig and defuse a bomb before it caused a tsunami. And as usual, he was the only one who hadn't been given a gun. How had he managed to get himself into this? For a moment, he remembered walking with Jack Starbright on the Rocks in Sydney. It seemed a long, long time ago.

Below them the Timor Sea was black and still. They were rapidly approaching Indonesian airspace. The helicopter droned on through the night.

The light turned orange.

Smoothly, one inch at a time, the great door at the back of the helicopter dropped open, revealing the black rush of the night behind. Although it was true there was no moon, the sea seemed to be shining, as if with some natural phosphorescence—Alex could see it glinting far below.

He hadn't even thought about the parachute jump until now, but as the reality hit him, his stomach lurched. The simple truth was that he wasn't some sort of daredevil who enjoyed the prospect of hurling himself from eight thousand feet in the dark. Right now he would give anything to be back in London with Jack.

Well, all he had to do was survive the next hour. One way or another, in just sixty minutes this would all be over.

The door had gone down as far as it could and clicked into position. It was jutting out of the back of the helicopter. A short walk into nothing. "I'll be watching you," Ben shouted. With the roar of the wind, only Alex heard. "Don't worry! I'll stick close..."

"Thanks!" Alex shouted back the single word.

Then the light went green.

No time to think. Because of his position, Alex was going to be the first out. Maybe they had planned it that way. He didn't even hesitate. If he stopped to think what he was doing, he might lose the resolve. Three steps, trailing the cord from his parachute behind him. Suddenly the blades were right over his head, thrashing the air. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Ben. He jumped.

There was a moment of complete disorientation—he remembered it from the last time—when he couldn't quite believe what he'd done and had no idea what would happen next. He was falling so fast that he couldn't breathe. He was completely out of control. Then the parachute opened automatically in the slipstream. He felt the jolt as his descent slowed. And then the peace. He was floating, dangling underneath an invisible silk canopy, black against the black night sky.

He looked down and saw the oil rig. He could only make out its vague shape—two geometric islands with a narrow corridor in between. There were about twenty lights, flickering and still tiny on the twin platforms. By joining them in his imagination, Alex was able to draw a mental image of Dragon Nine.

He twisted around and saw the helicopter, already far away, and beneath it the eleven black flowers that were the other parachutes. It seemed to him that the Chinook was surprisingly quiet. If he could barely hear it at this altitude, perhaps Major Yu would have heard nothing below. Just as Scooter had promised, there was no wind. The sea was utterly flat. Alex didn't need to steer himself.

He seemed to be heading in exactly the right direction. He could make out the white *H* in the middle of the heliport. *H* for happy landing...at least, that was what he hoped.

There are three stages to a parachute descent. The raw fear of the jump itself. The sense of calm once the chute has opened. And the first panic as the ground rushes up. Alex reached the third stage all too soon, and that was when he realized that he had drifted off course after all. Maybe he had been overconfident. Maybe some sea breeze had caught him unawares. But suddenly he found himself with nothing but water below him. He was drifting away from the triangular processing platform. Urgently, Alex tugged the two cords at his shoulders, trying to change direction. He was plunging toward the sea. He couldn't let that happen. The splash might give the others away. Worse than that, he might drown.

Alex jerked and writhed helplessly but at the last minute another breeze caught him and carried him over the lip of the drilling platform and onto one of the decks. He had been doubly lucky. The deck was wide enough to allow him to land safely, dropping to one knee and folding in his parachute in a single movement. And the area he had chosen was like a metallic courtyard, enclosed on all sides. With a bit of luck, he would be completely out of sight. What about the noise of landing? No worries there. He had landed on a bumpy, uneven surface, close to some sort of electrical generator. The noise of the machinery would have covered the crash of his feet as they made contact with the metal surface.

Five seconds later, a figure dropped out of the sky and landed just a few yards away. It was Ben Daniels. Unlike Alex, he must have chosen the deck with pinpoint accuracy. He gathered in his chute and gave Alex the thumbs-up. Alex twisted around. As far as he could see, all the other SAS men had landed on the processing platform. He looked up. The helicopter had already gone, but presumably it would be nearby in case it was needed.

Alex realized that his own inexperience had spoiled Scooter's plan. The whole idea had been to stick together. It was vital that Alex should be protected at all times. In fact, he and Ben were cut off on the drilling platform. The SAS men would have to make their way across the bridge to find him. And if Yu's control room was on the other side, they would have to take Alex all the way back again.

Not good.

He looked around him. He realized now that he was standing on a row of pipes. The whole deck was covered with them, cut into lengths of about ten feet. A huge metal trough rose up out of the ground, slanting toward the metal tower that housed the wellhead. Presumably, the pipes would be dragged up and somehow assembled in a straight line before they were lowered all the way to the seabed and beyond. On the other side, a metal wall rose up, like the side of a fortress. There were windows on the third or fourth floor, but they were so covered in dirt and grease that surely nobody would be able to see through them. One of the cranes stretched out over the water, its arm silhouetted against the stars and the night sky.

Ben Daniels had taken off his parachute. He scuttled over to Alex, keeping low. He must have already come to the same conclusion—but he had decided what to do. “We won't wait for them,” he whispered. “We'll start looking over here. We don't have a lot of time.”

Alex didn't have a watch. He looked at Ben's. It was 11:10. He wondered how so much time could have passed so quickly.

The two of them set off together, making their way across the pipes, trying to find the way into the wellhead. Dragon Nine was bigger than Alex had expected, but at the same time every inch was crammed with pipes and cables, cog wheels, chains, dials, and valves. The oil rig was also a living thing, throbbing and humming as different machines carried power or coolant to the various outlets. It was a hard, unpleasant environment. Every surface had a permanent coating of mud, oil, grease, and puddles of salt water. Alex could feel his sneakers sticking to the floor as he walked.

But Yu didn't seem to have posted any guards. Scooter had been right about that. With Alex supposedly dead, why should he have been expecting any trouble, miles from anywhere, in the middle of the Timor Sea? Together, they eased their way around corners and between ventilation towers, immediately lost in the great tangle that had been designed to pump oil from the seabed, thousands of feet below. Ben was carrying a miniature flashlight, which he kept cupped in his left hand, allowing only a trickle of light to escape. His right hand held an automatic pistol, a Walther PPK with a Brausch silencer attached.

Scooter and the other SAS men had dropped out of sight. Alex could imagine them moving toward him on the other side of the water. In the far distance he thought he heard a sound: a soft thud, the clatter of metal against metal, a stifled cry cut off very quickly. Maybe there were guards after all. If so, one of them might be wishing that he had been a little more alert.

Ben was opening doors, peering in through windows. There was still no sign of life on the drilling platform. They climbed a flight of steps that brought them to a metal walkway on the very edge, high over the sea. Alex looked down, and that was when he saw it. The oil rig was actually balancing on four huge legs, like an oversized metal table. One of the legs had a ladder that ran all the way down to the surface, actually disappearing beneath it. Next to the ladder and tucked away almost underneath the platform was an executive yacht, the sort of thing that would have looked more at home in a private marina—perhaps in the south of France. The boat was about sixty feet in length, sleek and white, with several sundecks and a bow that was clearly designed for speed. Alex tapped Ben on the shoulder and pointed. Ben nodded.

It had to belong to Major Yu. It was surely there to provide him with a fast escape, meaning that he must be on the processing platform, just as Scooter had suspected. If Alex had known the make of the yacht, there would have been no doubt in his mind at all. It was a Sealine F42/5 flybridge motorboat with a unique extending cockpit system. It had been designed and manufactured in Britain.

Ben signaled the way forward. More than ever, Alex wished that Scooter and the others were with them. They were following a narrow gantry that led to a door set in a circular building, jutting out over the corner of the rig with curving windows that provided views in three directions.

The control room. It had to be.

They crept toward it. Alex didn't know what Ben had in mind. Maybe he was going to wait for the rest of the squadron to catch up. That would have been the sensible thing to do.

But in the end, he was never given a choice. Without warning, a spotlight swept through the air, searing its way across the drilling platform. A second later, a machine gun began firing, bullets ricocheting crazily off the railings, slamming into the walls and sparking as they flew off the metal walkways. A siren began to wail, and at the same time Alex heard answering fire from the other side of the bridge. The silence of the night had been shattered. There was an explosion, a ball of flame

erupting into the night like a brilliant flower. More shooting. Ben twisted and fired twice. Alex didn't even see his target, but there was a cry and a man fell out of the sky, slammed into a gantry, and bounced off it into the sea.

"This way!" Ben shouted. He had already started forward, and Alex went after him, knowing that Yu would be expecting them now but that there could be no going back. Yu's men would be taking positions all over the oil rig. They had the advantage. There were a dozen ladders they could climb and platforms high above from where they could pick off the invaders one by one. He and Ben would be safer inside. The door was ahead of them, leading into the circular room. Ben reached it and crouched down. "Stay back!" he commanded.

Alex saw him count to three.

He slammed the door open and went in firing. Despite what he had been told and even though he wasn't carrying a weapon himself, Alex followed. And that was how he saw what happened in the next few seconds, even though it would be a lot longer before he took it all in.

There had been two men in the control room, surrounded by computer screens, a radio transmitter, and the equipment that Alex had seen on the *Liberian Star*. One of them was Major Winston Yu. He was holding the pistol that he had just used to gun down Ben Daniels. Ben was lying on the floor in a spreading pool of his own blood. The Walther PPK had dropped out of his hand and lay pointing toward Alex. There was another man lying facedown a short distance away, and Alex realized that Ben must have shot him as he came in. Major Yu himself was unhurt. He was staring at Alex in astonishment and disbelief.

Somehow he managed to recover. "Well, this is a surprise," he said.

Alex didn't move. He was less than three yards away from Yu. He had nowhere to go. Yu could shoot him down at any time.

"Come in and close the door," Yu said.

Alex did as he was told. Outside, the battle was still going on—but it was happening on the other platform. Too far away. The heavy door clicked shut.

"I knew you hadn't drowned in the river," Yu said. "Something told me. And when we couldn't find your body..." He shook his head. "I have to say, Alex, you're very hard to kill."

Alex didn't reply. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ben's pistol lying on the floor, and part of him wondered if he could dive down and grab it. But he would never be able to bring it around and fire it in time. He was too easy a target.

"You're finished, Major Yu," Alex said. "And you've failed. ASIS knows what you're trying to do. Reef Island has been evacuated. There's no point in setting off a tsunami. Everyone will know it was you."

Yu considered Alex's words carefully. Part of what he had said had been a lie—the Reef Island conference was still taking place—but there was no way Yu could know that. Alex was here. He had brought the SAS with him. The facts spoke for themselves.

Eventually, Yu sighed. "You're probably right," he said. "But I think we'll go ahead anyway. After all, it's been months of planning, and I'd like to make my mark on the world."

“But you’ll kill thousands of people—for no reason.”

“What reason can you give me to spare them?” Yu shook his head. “World chaos does have its uses, Alex. This was never just about Reef Island. The reconstruction of the Australian coast will cost billions of dollars, and I have commercial interests all over Southeast Asia. The Chada Trading Agency has shares in many building companies that will be first in line for the new contracts. Unwin Toys will offer gifts to the many hundreds of new orphans—paid for, of course, by the Australian government. There are all sorts of other interests too. A snakehead thrives on misfortune and unhappiness. For us it just means new business.”

He glanced at one of the television screens. Alex saw a white line running straight from the top to the bottom. There was a blinking red square attached to it, moving slowly downward.

“Royal Blue,” Yu said. “In six or seven minutes it will reach the seabed and enter the shaft that I told you about. The shaft continues a further half mile down. At midnight exactly the bomb will detonate, and my work will be done. By then, I will be a long way away and you will be no more than a fading memory.”

He raised the gun. The single black eye searched for him.

“Good-bye, Alex.”

And that was when Alex heard a groan. It came from the floor. The man who had been shot by Ben Daniels was struggling to drag himself into a sitting position. Major Yu was delighted. “How very fortunate!” he exclaimed, lowering the weapon. “Before you die, I can introduce you to one of my most trusted and effective colleagues. Although on second thought, I believe you’ve already met.”

The man looked up.

It was Ash.

He had been shot twice in the chest and the life was seeping out of him. Alex could see it in the dark eyes, which were filled with pain and remorse and something that was less definable but that might have been shame.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” Ash gasped. He had to stop himself to catch his breath. “I didn’t want you to know.”

“I’m not sure that Alex is surprised,” Yu remarked.

Alex shook his head. “I guessed.”

“May I ask how?”

This time there was no point in ignoring the question. Yu had been about to shoot him anyway. The longer Alex could keep him talking, the more chance there was that the SAS might finally arrive. Alex could hear the alarm, but there was less shooting and it seemed to be farther away. Had the SAS been overpowered, or were they already in command and on their way? He glanced at the television screen. The little red square was continuing its journey down.

“Everything went wrong from the start,” he said, talking directly to Major Yu. “Ethan Brooke had already lost two agents. Somehow the snakehead knew everything he planned. They knew about me too. Why else was I chosen for that fight in Bangkok? It didn’t make any sense. But then, when I was

in the arena, Mr. Sukit said something to me. He said he'd kill me if I didn't take part, and he said it first in French, then in English. Why? If he really believed I was an Afghan boy, he'd have known I wouldn't speak either.

"I wondered about that. But it got worse. Ash gave me an emergency telephone number. I called it and it led me straight to you."

Ash opened his mouth to speak, but Alex cut in.

"I know," he said. He looked briefly at the dying man. "You made it look good with the fake blood, as if you'd been taken prisoner like me. But then I lost two of the gadgets Smithers had given me, and that was when I knew it had to be you.

"I told you about the watch and the belt. Somehow the battery disappeared out of the watch. I suppose you must have done that when I was asleep that night in Jakarta. As for the belt, Major Yu took that when I was in his house. But I'd never told you about the coins. Smithers had also given me coins with an explosive charge and those stayed in my pocket. If I'd told you, I guess those would have gone too."

He stopped.

"When did you start working for Scorpia, Ash?" he asked.

Ash glanced at Major Yu.

"Tell him—but be quick," Yu snapped. "I don't think we have very much time."

"It was after Mdina." Ash's voice was weak. His face was gray, and he could no longer move from the chest down. One hand was on his chest. The other lay palm upward on the floor. "You can't understand, Alex. I was so badly hurt. Yassen..." He coughed, and blood speckled his lip. "I had given everything to the service. My life. My health. I wasn't even thirty, and I was crippled. I was never going to sleep properly, never eat properly. From that day on it was just pills and pain.

"And what was my reward? Blunt humiliated me. I was demoted, taken out of the field. He told me..." Ash swallowed hard. With every word he was finding it hard to go on. "He told me what I already knew," he rasped. "I was second rate. Never as good...as your dad."

He had almost come to the end of his strength. His shoulders slumped, and for a moment Alex thought he had gone. The blood was all around him now. There was a steady flow of it from his mouth.

Major Yu was enjoying himself. "Why don't you tell him the rest of it, Ash?" he crowed.

"No!" Ash straightened his head. "Please..."

"I already know," Alex said. He turned to Ash one last time. He could hardly bear to look at him. "You killed my parents, didn't you? The bomb in the airplane. You put it there."

Ash couldn't answer. His hand tightened on his chest. He had only seconds left.

"We had to test him," Major Yu explained. "When he came over to us, we had to make sure he was telling us the truth. After all, we had just been tricked by one British intelligence agent—John Rider. So we set him a very simple task, one that would prove to us with no doubt that he was ready to switch sides."

“I didn’t want to...” It wasn’t Ash’s voice. It was just a whisper.

“He didn’t want to, but he did. For the money. He put the bomb on the plane and he detonated it with his own hand. Rather more successful than his mission in Mdina. And the start of a long association with us.”

“Alex...”

Ash tried to look up. But his head fell forward. He was dead.

Major Yu prodded him with his foot. “Well, as they say, Ash to ashes and dust to dust,” he remarked. “I’m glad you heard that from him, Alex. You can take it with you to the grave.”

He raised the gun once again and pointed it at Alex.

There was an explosion, loud and near. But it wasn’t the gun. The entire room shook, and dust and metal filings came showering down from the roof. Alex heard a shearing of metal as the crane overhead broke in half and came crashing down. The shock sent Major Yu reeling back. His arm banged against one of the work surfaces and the gun went off, the bullet smashing uselessly into a wall. Major Yu was shouting in agony, and Alex realized that the impact of the blow had shattered the brittle bone in Yu’s arm. The gun now lay useless on the ground.

Deafened, half dazed, Alex threw himself onto the gun, snatched it in both hands, desperate to protect himself from further attack. But he was already too late. Yu had already decided to leave. The room was full of smoke. The SAS were here. Alex Rider would have to wait until another day.

There was a trapdoor set in the floor, with the ladder leading down underneath. Somehow, using his one good arm, he pulled it open and climbed down, dropping into the boat below. But the fall had been too far for his bones. The impact broke both his ankles. Howling with agony, barely able to stand, he groped his way over to the controls. He used a knife to cut through the mooring rope. A second later, he was speeding away.

Meanwhile, Alex had staggered over to the controls. On the TV, the little square representing Royal Blue was about two inches above the seabed but edging closer all the time. There was the scanner, wired into the computer. Alex slammed his palm onto the glass panel and let out a sigh of relief as a line of text appeared on the computer screen.

>AUTHORIZATION ACCEPTED

There was a pause, then a second line scrolled across.

>Override master commands? Y/N

Alex tapped on the *Y* key just as the door crashed open and about half a dozen SAS men somehow managed to burst in, covering every angle with their weapons. Scooter was at the front of them with Texas and X-Ray right behind him. It looked as if Sparks, the young soldier who had once played a guitar on an Australian beach, hadn’t made it.

Scooter saw Alex. “Where’s Yu?” he demanded.

“Gone.” Alex had his eyes fixed on the screen. A menu had come up. He ran his eye down the list of options, looking for the one that said DISARM or DEACTIVATE. But it wasn’t there. Instead, his eyes settled on the last command.

>DETONATE

“Over here!” It was Texas. He had found Ben Daniels and was already kneeling beside him, tearing open his shirt to examine his wound. One of the other soldiers rushed over with a medical kit.

Alex slid the mouse, highlighting the last command. He looked at the television screen. Royal Blue was still above the seabed but almost touching it. He remembered what he had heard. The bomb still had another half mile to travel, far down into the Earth’s crust. A timeline read 23:47:05:00, the microseconds flickering and changing too fast for his eye to follow. But the bomb still had thirteen more minutes until it would be in position. The moon and the sun were not quite ready yet.

Could Alex destroy the bomb without accidentally setting off the tsunami?

In desperation he turned to the SAS leader, who seemed to understand the stakes almost at once.

“Do it,” he said.

Alex double-clicked on the command.

Three thousand, five hundred feet below Dragon Nine but five hundred feet above the seabed, the bomb exploded. Alex felt the entire oil rig shudder violently, and the floor veered crazily beneath his feet as five of the steel tethers along with the drill pipe itself were torn apart.

And half a mile away, speeding through the water in his Sealine yacht, Major Yu heard the explosion and knew, with an overwhelming sense of bitterness and defeat, that even his last hopes had been destroyed. Somehow Royal Blue had been detonated too early. There would be no tsunami. He sat, hunched up in front of the steering wheel, moaning quietly to himself. He had comprehensively failed.

He didn’t even feel the shock wave from the explosion until it hit him, but this of course was the main purpose of Royal Blue, to flatten anything for miles around. The pulse smashed into the yacht, destroying the electric system, snuffing out the lights, ripping every fitting apart. Major Yu’s bone structure wasn’t strong enough to withstand it. Every single bone in his body fractured at the same time. For about two seconds, he remained vaguely human. Then his body, with no frame to support it, crumpled in on itself, a bag of skin full of broken pieces. The boat veered around, a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of British engineering with no one to steer it. Zigzagging crazily, it disappeared into the night.

Back on Dragon Nine, Yu’s remaining men were being rounded up. The SAS had lost two men, with three more injured. Ben Daniels was still alive. He’d been given a shot of morphine, and there was an oxygen mask strapped to his face.

Scooter had finally noticed the other body lying in the control room.

“Who was that?” he asked.

Alex took one last look at his godfather.

“It was nobody,” he said.

DINNER FOR THREE

“IT’S VERY GOOD TO see you, Alex. How are you getting on at school?”

It seemed a very long time since Alex had last found himself back in this room, the office on the fifteenth floor of the building on Liverpool Street that called itself the Royal and General Bank but that in fact housed the Special Operations division of MI6. Alan Blunt, its chief executive, was sitting opposite him, his desk as neat and as empty as ever: a couple of folders, some papers awaiting signature, a single pen, solid silver, resting at an angle. Everything in its place. Alex knew that Blunt liked it that way.

Blunt didn’t seem to have changed at all. Even the suit was the same, and if there was a little more gray in his hair, who would notice when the man had been entirely gray to begin with? But Blunt was not the sort of person to grow old and wrinkled, to wear baggy sweaters, play golf, and spend more time with his grandchildren. His job, the world he inhabited, had somehow pinned him down. He was, Alex decided, a twenty-first-century fossil.

It was the first week of December, and suddenly the temperature had dropped, as if in response to the Christmas decorations, which were going up all around. There had even been a few scatterings of snow. There wasn’t enough to stick, but it had added a certain chill to the air. Walking to the office, Alex had passed a Salvation Army band playing “Good King Wenceslas.” The players had been huddling together as if for comfort, and even their music had been cold and mournful...as well as slightly out of tune.

He couldn’t hear the music in the office. The windows would doubtless have been double or triple glazed to stop any sound from coming in or—more importantly—leaking out. He focused his attention on the man sitting opposite him and wondered how he should answer the question. Blunt would know already, of course. He would probably have access to Alex’s school reports before they were even printed.

Alex had just completed his first week back at Brookland School. Blunt would know that too. Alex had no doubt that he had been under twenty-four-hour surveillance from the moment his Qantas flight had touched down at Heathrow Airport and he had been hurried out through the VIP channel to the waiting car outside. The last time he had taken on Scorpia, he had been shot, and MI6 certainly weren’t going to let that happen again. He thought he had seen his tail once: a youngish man standing on a street corner, seemingly waiting for a taxi. When he had looked for him a second later, the man had disappeared. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t. Blunt’s field agents knew how to live in the shadows.

And so, finally, he was back at school.

For most kids of his age, it meant coursework and homework, lessons that dragged on too long, and terrible food. For Alex it was all that and something more. He had been nervous, walking back into Brookland on a chilly Monday morning. It had seemed a long time since he had seen the familiar buildings: the bright red brickwork and the stretches of plate glass. Miss Bedfordshire, the school

secretary, who had always had a soft spot for him, had been waiting in the reception area.

“Alex Rider!” she had exclaimed. “What has it been this time?”

“Glandular fever, Miss Bedfordshire.”

Alex’s illnesses had become almost legendary in the past year. Part of him wondered if Miss Bedfordshire really believed in them or if she was just playing along.

“You’re going to have to drop a whole year if you’re not careful,” she remarked.

“I’m very careful, Miss Bedfordshire.”

“I’m sure you are.”

In Sydney, Alex had been worried that he wouldn’t fit in, but from the very first moment he arrived, it was almost as if he hadn’t been away. Everyone was pleased to see him, and he wasn’t as far behind as he had feared. He would have extra tutoring over the Christmas vacation, and with a bit of luck he would be at the same level as everyone else by the time he began the next semester. Surrounded by his friends and swept along by the day’s routine—the ringing bells, the slamming doors, and desks—Alex realized that he wasn’t just back at school. He was back in normal life.

But he had been expecting Alan Blunt to make contact, and sure enough, he had got the call on his cell. Blunt had asked Alex to come to a meeting on Friday afternoon. Alex had noticed the one small difference. Blunt had asked. He hadn’t demanded.

So here he was with his backpack still full of books for the weekend: a particularly vicious math paper and *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell. Another British writer, he reflected. Major Yu would surely have loved it. Alex was wearing his school uniform—a dark blue jacket, gray trousers, and a purposefully crooked tie. Jack had bought him a scarf when she was on vacation in Washington and it was hanging loosely around his neck. He felt relieved to look the same as everyone else. He just wanted to get back to normal.

“There are a few things you might like to know,” Blunt said. “Starting with a message from Ethan Brooke. He asked me to pass on his thanks and his good wishes. He said that if you ever decide to emigrate to Australia, he’ll be happy to arrange a permanent visa.”

“That’s very kind of him.”

“Well, you did a remarkable job, Alex. Quite apart from tracking down our missing weapon, you’ve more or less destroyed the snakehead. The Chada Trading Agency has gone out of business, as has Unwin Toys.”

“Did you realize it was an anagram?” Mrs. Jones asked. She was sitting in a chair next to the desk, one leg crossed over the other, looking very relaxed. Alex got the sense that she was glad to see him. “Unwin Toys. Winston Yu. That was the vanity of the man...he named it after himself.”

“Have you found him?” Alex asked. He had last seen Yu climbing into the motorboat and didn’t know if he’d gotten away.

“Oh yes. We found what was left of him. Not a pleasant sight.” Blunt folded his hands in front of him. “Yu dealt with quite a lot of his own people before ASIS could reach them,” he went on. “I think you know that he killed the captain of the *Liberian Star*...De Wynter. After your escape from the

hospital, Dr. Tanner committed suicide, possibly following orders from Yu. ASIS did manage to pick up the rest of the staff, though. Two guards—one of them with a fractured skull—and a handful of nurses. They also arrested a man called Varga...”

The name meant nothing to Alex.

“He was a technician,” Mrs. Jones explained. “He helped adapt Royal Blue to work underwater. He also set up the detonation procedure.”

Now Alex recalled the man he had glimpsed on the *Liberian Star*, setting up the scanner for Major Yu.

“He was a fairly low-level Scorpia operative,” Blunt added. “Out of Haiti, I understand. He’s being questioned and may provide some useful information.”

“How is Ben?”

“He’s still in the hospital in Darwin,” Mrs. Jones said. “He was lucky. The bullets didn’t do any serious damage, and the doctors say he’ll be out by Christmas.”

“We’ll look after him,” Blunt added.

“Better than you looked after Ash.” Alex looked Blunt straight in the eyes.

“Yes.” Blunt shifted uncomfortably. “I wanted you to know, Alex, that we had no idea about Ash’s involvement with Scorpia. Even now I find it hard to believe that he had any involvement with...what happened to your parents.”

“I’m so sorry, Alex,” Mrs. Jones cut in. “I understand how you must be feeling.”

“Do you think Ethan Brooke knew?” Alex asked. It was something he had been thinking about on the long flight home. “He knew someone was a traitor. Someone had been feeding the snakehead with information all along. He put me together with Ash. Was that what he really wanted? To flush him out?”

“It’s quite possible,” Blunt said, and Alex was surprised. The head of MI6 wasn’t normally so honest. “Brooke is a very devious man.”

“It’s what makes him so good at his job,” Mrs. Jones remarked.

It was five o’clock. Outside, it was getting dark. Alan Blunt went over to the window and shooed away a couple of pigeons. Then he lowered the blind.

“There are only a couple of things to add,” he said as he took his place again. “Most important of all, we want you to know that you’re safe. Scorpia aren’t going to have another crack at you.” He blinked twice. “Not like last time.”

“We’ve been in contact with them,” Mrs. Jones explained. “We made it clear that if anything happened to you, we would let the whole world know that they had been beaten—for a second time—by a fourteen-year-old boy. It would make them a laughingstock and would destroy what little reputation they have left.”

“Scorpia may be finished anyway,” Blunt said. “But they got the message. We’ll keep an eye on you just to be on the safe side, but I don’t think you need to worry.”

“And what was the other thing?” Alex asked.

“Only that we hope you found what you were looking for, Alex.” It was Mrs. Jones who had answered.

“I found some of it,” Alex said.

“Your father was a very good man,” Blunt muttered. “I’ve told you that before. You obviously take after him, Alex. And maybe, when you leave school, you’ll think again about intelligence work. We still need people like you, and it’s not a bad career.”

Alex stood up. “I’ll show myself out,” he said.

He took the subway back to Sloane Square and then a bus along King’s Road to his house. He had told Jack he would be late home from school. The two of them would have supper together when he arrived, and then he would start his homework. He was seeing his friend Tom Harris on Saturday. The Chelsea soccer team were playing at home against Arsenal, and somehow Tom had managed to scrounge two tickets. Otherwise, Alex had no plans for the weekend.

Jack Starbright was waiting for him in the kitchen, putting the final touches to a salad. Alex helped himself to a glass of apple juice and hoisted himself onto one of the bar stools by the counter. He liked to talk to Jack while she cooked.

“How did you make out?” she asked.

“It was fine,” Alex said. He reached out and stole a piece of tomato. “Alan Blunt offered me a job.”

“I’ll kill you if you take it.”

“Don’t worry. I let him know I wasn’t interested.”

Jack knew everything that had happened to Alex since she had left him in Sydney, including Ash’s final moments on Dragon Nine. He had told her his story the moment he got home, and when he had finished, she had turned away and sat for a long minute in silence. When she had finally turned back again, there had been tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Alex had said. “I know you liked him.”

“That’s not what’s upsetting me, Alex,” she had replied.

“Then what?”

“It’s this world. MI6. What it did to him, to your parents. I suppose I’m scared about what it’ll do to you.”

“I think I’ve finished with it, Jack.”

“That’s what you said last time, Alex. But the question is—has it finished with you?”

Now Alex glanced at the table. He noticed that it was set for three. “Who’s coming for supper?” he asked.

“I forgot to tell you.” Jack smiled. “We have a surprise guest.”

“Who?”

“You’ll find out when they get here.” She had barely spoken the words when the front doorbell rang. “That’s good timing,” she went on. “Why don’t you answer it?”

Alex noticed something strange in her eyes. It wasn’t like Jack to have secrets from him. He was still holding the piece of tomato. He tossed it back into the salad, swung himself down, and went out to the hall.

He could just make out a figure shimmering behind the mottled glass of the front door. Whoever it was had activated the automatic light on the porch. Alex threw open the door and stopped in complete surprise.

A young, dark-haired, and very attractive girl was standing there. The car that had dropped her off was just moving away. Alex was so stunned that it took him a minute to recognize her. Even then, he didn’t believe who it was.

“Sabina!” he exclaimed. The last time he had seen Sabina Pleasure, the two of them had been on Richmond Bridge on the river Thames when she had told him she was leaving for America. He had been convinced that he would never see her again.

That had been only a few months ago, but she looked completely different. She must be almost sixteen now. Her hair had grown longer, and her shape had changed. She looked wonderful in tight-fitting DKNY jeans and a soft cashmere jersey.

“Hi, Alex.” She stood where she was as if she were a little wary of him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Aren’t you glad to see me?”

“Of course I am. But…” Alex’s voice trailed off.

Sabina smiled. “That was my dad in the car. We’re visiting for Christmas. He’s over here writing a story for the paper. Something about some sort of weird church or something. He got me out of school early, and we’re going to stay over here until the new year.”

“In London?”

“Where else?”

“Is your mom here?”

“Yeah. We’re renting an apartment in Notting Hill.”

The two of them stared at each other. There were all sorts of things Alex wanted to say. He didn’t know where to begin.

“Are you two going to come in?” Jack called from the kitchen. “Or would you like me to serve dinner in the street?”

There was a moment of awkwardness. Alex realized that he hadn’t even invited Sabina into the house. Worse than that, he was actually blocking the way. He stepped to one side to let her pass. She smiled a little nervously and stepped inside. But the doorway was narrow, and as she came in, he felt her briefly against him. Her hair brushed his cheek, and he smelled the perfume she was wearing. At

that moment, he realized how glad he was to see her. It was as if everything was beginning all over again.

Now she was in the hall and he was the one outside.

“Sabina...,” he began.

“Alex,” she said, “I’m freezing. Why don’t you shut the door?”

Alex smiled and closed the door, and the two of them went in.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AS WITH ALL THE Alex Rider books, I've tried to make *Snakehead* as accurate as possible—and I wouldn't have been able to do this without the generous help of people all around the world. So it seems only polite to mention them here.

Dr. Michael Foale at NASA spoke to me at length for a second time, and the opening chapter is largely based on his own experiences returning from outer space. The mechanism by which Major Yu brings chaos to the world was suggested to me by Professor Bill McGuire at University College London...he also came up with the planetary alignment that makes it feasible.

Panos Avramopoulos at CMA-CGM Shipping (UK) Ltd. kindly arranged for me to visit a container ship, and Captain Jenkinson allowed me on board. A few weeks later, Andy Simpson of Global SantaFe and Rupert Hunt from Shell gave up a whole day of their time to show me around an oil rig near Aberdeen. Neither of these visits would have been possible without Jill Hughes, to whom I am eternally grateful.

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Finally, my assistant Cat Taylor organized everything and then organized it again when I changed my mind. Justin Somper continues to be the guiding light behind much of Alex's success. And my very lovely editor, Jane Winterbotham, spent hours trawling through some of the most painful notes ever to come out of a publishing house to ensure that all the dates and times make sense.

AH

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Saving the world one mission at a time

ALEX RIDER

CROCODILE TEARS



ANTHONY HOROWITZ

#1 New York Times bestselling author

Crocodile Tears

Alex Rider [8]

Anthony Horowitz

Walker Books Ltd (2011)

From School Library Journal

Grade 6–10—Alex Rider is only 14, but that hasn't stopped MI6, the British espionage organization, from recruiting him for dangerous missions. Here, Alex is enlisted in a seemingly quick and easy mission of downloading computer data while on a school trip to a lab immersed in the genetic engineering of plants. While there, he discovers a sinister plot involving a criminal turned preacher and philanthropist. As in the earlier installments, the book is chock-full of excitement and suspense from the first page to the last. It starts with a bomb at a nuclear plant in India, and along the way there is a charity black-tie card game, poison needles, car crashes, bullets, and exploding gel pens. Most of the backstory is explained, so no prior knowledge of the earlier books is necessary. Great for reluctant readers.—_Jake Pettit, Thompson Valley High School, Loveland, CO_

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From

Alex Rider, teenage British secret service agent, returns. This time, a wealthy villain schemes to make millions by creating disasters and then pocketing the money from false relief agencies. Alex discovers the bad guy's plan to cause famine in Africa, but he is able to expose the fake philanthropist, although he is nearly fed to hungry crocs in the process. Horowitz's series remains on top of the growing genre of YA novels that feature intelligence agencies employing teenagers. He knows how to pace a thriller and delivers one exciting scene after another. Alex Rider fans will rejoice. Grades 6-9. --Todd Morning

SUMMARY:

A charity broker con artist has raised millions of dollars in donations, only to invest them in a form of genetically modified corn that has the power to release an airborne strain of virus so powerful it can knock out an entire country in one windy day. A catastrophe so far-reaching that it would raise millions of dollars more in charitable donations, all of which would be embezzled by one man. The antidote? Alex Rider, of course, who survives gunfire, explosions, and hand-to-hand combat with mercenaries—just another day in the life of an average kid.

SUMMARY:

Ten million Alex Rider books sold worldwide. Other Alex Rider missions: "Snakehead", "Stormbreaker", "Point Blanc", "Skeleton Key", "Eagle Strike", "Scorpia" and "Ark Angel".

Chapter 1: FIRE STAR

RAVI CHANDRA WAS GOING to be a rich man.

It made his head spin to think about it. In the next few hours, he would earn more than he had managed in the last five years: a fantastic sum, paid in cash, right into his hands. It was the start of a new life. He would be able to buy his wife the clothes that she wanted, a car, a proper diamond ring to replace the band of cheap gold she had worn since they were married. He would take the boys, aged four and six, to Disneyland in California. And he would travel to London and see the Indian cricket team play at Lord's, something he had dreamed about all his life but had never thought possible.

Until now.

He sat hunched up beside the window of the bus that was taking him to work, as he had done every day for as long as he could remember. It was devilishly hot. The fans had broken down once again and of course the company was in no hurry to replace them. Worse still, this was the end of June, the time of the year known in southern India as *Agni Nakshatram*—or “Fire Star.” The sun was unforgiving. It was almost impossible to breathe. The damp heat clung to you from morning until night and the whole city stank.

When he had money, he would move from this area. He would leave the cramped two-bedroom apartment in Mylapore, the busiest, most crowded part of the city, and go and live somewhere quieter and cooler with a little more space to stretch out. He would have a fridge full of beer and a big plasma TV. Really, it wasn't so much to ask.

The bus was slowing down. Ravi had done this journey so many times that he would have known where they were with his eyes closed. They had left the city behind them. In the distance there were hills—steep and covered, every inch of them, with thick, green vegetation. But the area he was in now was more like a wasteland, with just a few palm trees sprouting among the rubble and electricity pylons closing in on all sides. His place of work was just ahead. In a moment, they would stop at the first security gate.

Ravi was an engineer. His identity badge with his photograph and his full name—Ravindra Manpreet Chandra—described him as a Plant Operator. He worked at the Jowada nuclear power station just three miles north of Chennai, the fourth largest city in India, formerly known as Madras.

He glanced up and there was the power station in front of him, a series of huge multicolored blocks securely locked inside miles and miles of wire. It sometimes occurred to him that wire defined Jowada.

There was razor wire and barbed wire, wire fences and telephone lines. And of course, the electricity that they manufactured was carried all over India by thousands more miles of wire. How strange to think that when someone turned on their TV in Pondicherry or their bedside light in Nellore, it had all begun here.

The bus stopped at the security point with its TV cameras and armed guards. Following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, nuclear power plants all over the world had become

recognized as potential terrorist targets. New barriers had been added. Security forces had been enlarged. For a long time it had all been an incredible nuisance, with people ready to jump on you if you so much as sneezed. But it had been many years since 9/11. People had become lazy. Take old Suresh, for example, the guard at this outer checkpoint. He recognized everyone on the bus. He saw them at the same time every day: in at half past seven, out at half past five. Occasionally, he'd bump into them while strolling past the shops on Ramnganatha Street. He even knew their wives and girlfriends. It wouldn't have occurred to him to ask for ID or to check what they were carrying into Jowada. He waved the bus through.

Two minutes later, Ravi got out. He was a short, skinny man with bad skin and a mustache that sat uncomfortably on his upper lip. He was already wearing overalls and protective steel-capped shoes. He was carrying a heavy toolbox. Nobody asked him why he had taken it home with him when normally he would have left it in his locker; nobody had cared. It was quite possible that he'd had to fix something in the apartment where he lived. Maybe he'd been moonlighting, carrying a few jobs out for the neighbors for a few extra rupees.

The bus had come to a final halt beside a brick wall with a door that, like every door at Jowada, was made of solid steel, designed to hold back smoke, fire, or even a direct missile strike. Another guard and more television cameras watched as the passengers got out and went through. On the other side of the door, a blank, whitewashed corridor led to a locker room, which was one of the few places in the complex that wasn't air-conditioned. Ravi opened his locker (there was a pinup of the Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty stuck in the door) and took out a safety helmet, goggles, earplugs, and a fluorescent jacket. He also removed a bunch of keys. Nuclear power stations do not use swipe cards or electronic locks on the majority of their doors. This is another safety measure. Manual locks and keys will still operate in the event of a power failure.

Still clutching his toolbox, Ravi set off down another corridor. When he had first come here, he had been amazed how clean everything was—especially when he compared it to the street where he lived, which was full of rubbish and potholes filled with muddy water and droppings from the oxen that lumbered along, pulling wooden carts between the cars and the motorized rickshaws. He turned a corner and there was the next checkpoint, the final barrier he would have to pass through before he was actually in.

For the first time, he was nervous. He knew what he was carrying. He remembered what he was about to do. What would happen if he were stopped? He would go to prison, perhaps for the rest of his life.

He had heard stories about Chennai Central Jail, about inmates buried in tiny cells far underground and food so disgusting that some preferred to starve to death. But it was too late to back out now. If he hesitated or did anything suspicious, that was one sure way to get stopped.

He came to a massive turnstile with bars as thick as baseball bats. It allowed only one person in at a time, and then you had to shuffle through as if you were being processed, as if you were some sort of factory machine. There was also an X-ray scanner, a metal detector, and yet more guards.

“Hey—Ravi!”

“Ramesh, my friend. You see the cricket last night?”

“I saw it. What a game!”

Soccer, cricket, tennis ... whatever. Sports were their currency. Every day, the plant operators passed it between them, and Ravi had deliberately watched Wimbledon the night before so that he could join in the conversation. Even in the cool of the corridor, he was sweating. He could feel the perspiration beading on his forehead and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. Surely someone would stop him and ask him why he was still holding on to his toolbox. Everyone knew the correct procedure. It should be opened and searched, all the contents taken out.

But it didn't happen. A moment later, he was through. Nobody had so much as questioned him. It had gone just as he thought it would. Knew it would. Nobody had lifted off the top tray of the toolbox and discovered the twenty pounds of C4 plastic explosive concealed underneath.

Ravi walked away from the barrier and stopped in front of a row of shelves. He pulled out a small plastic device that looked like a pager. This was his EPD—or Electronic Personal Dosimeter. It would record his own radiation level and warn him if he came into contact with any radioactive material. It had already been set with his personal ID and security clearance. There were four levels of security at Jowada, each one allowing access to areas with different risks of contamination. Just for once, Ravi's EPD had been set to the highest level. Today he was going to enter the heart of the power station, the reactor chamber itself.

This was where the deadly flame of Jowada burned. Sixty thousand uranium fuel rods, each one 3.85 meters long, bound together inside the pressure vessel that was the reactor itself. Every minute of the day and night, twenty thousand tons of fresh water were sent rushing through pipes both to cool the beast and to tame it. The resulting steam—two tons of it every second—powered the turbines. The turbines produced electricity. That was how it worked. In many ways it was very simple.

A nuclear reactor is at once the safest and the most dangerous place on the planet. An accident might have such nightmarish consequences that there can be no accident. The reactor chamber at Jowada was made out of steel-reinforced concrete. The walls were five feet thick. The great dome, stretching out over the whole thing, was the height and breadth of a major cathedral. In the event of a malfunction, the reactor could be turned off in seconds. And whatever happened in this room would be contained.

Nothing could be allowed to leak through to the outside world.

A thousand safeguards had been built into the construction and the running of Jowada. One man with a dream of watching cricket in London was about to blow them apart.

The approach had come six weeks before at the street corner closest to his apartment: two men, one a European, the other from Delhi. It turned out that the second man, the one from Delhi, was a friend of Ravi's cousin Jagdish, who worked in the kitchen of a five-star hotel. Once they had recognized each other, it seemed only natural to go for tea and samosas ... particularly as the European was paying.

“How much do they pay you at Jowada?” The European knew the answer without having to ask. “Only fifteen thousand rupees a month, yes? A child couldn't live on that amount, and you have a wife and a family. These people! They cheat the honest worker. Maybe it's time they were taught a

lesson... .”

Very quickly the conversation was steered the way the two men wanted it to go, and that first time, they'd left him with a gift, a fake Rolex watch. And why not? Jagdish had done them favors in the past, giving them free food that he had stolen from the kitchen. Now it was their turn to look after Ravi. The next time they met, a week later, it was an iPhone—the real thing. But the gifts were only a glimpse of all the riches that could be his if he would just agree to undertake a piece of business on their behalf. It was dangerous. A few people might be hurt. “But for you, my friend, it will mean a new life.

Everything you ever wanted can be yours... .”

Ravi Chandra entered the reactor chamber of the Jowada nuclear power station at exactly eight o'clock.

Four other engineers went in with him. They had to go in one at a time through an air lock—a white, circular corridor with an automatic sliding door at each end. In many ways it looked like something out of a space-ship, and its purpose was much the same. The exit wouldn't open until the entrance had closed. It was all part of the need for total containment. The five men were dressed identically, with safety helmets and goggles. All of them were carrying toolboxes. For the rest of the day they would carry out a series of tasks, some of them as ordinary as oiling a valve or changing a lightbulb. Even the most advanced technology needs occasional maintenance.

As they emerged from the air lock into the reactor chamber, they seemed almost to vanish, so tiny were they in these vast surroundings, dwarfed by the gantries and walkways—bright yellow—overhead, by electric hoists and cables, soaring banks of machinery, fuel rod transportation canisters, generators. Arc lamps shone down from the edges of the dome, and in the middle of it all, surrounded by ladders and platforms, what looked like an empty swimming pool plunged twelve yards down, with stainless steel plates on all four sides. This was the reactor. Underneath a 150-ton steel cap, millions of uranium atoms were splitting again and again, producing unimaginable heat.

Four metal towers stood guard in the chamber. If they were shaped a little like rockets, they were rockets that would never fly. Each one was locked in its own steel cage and connected to the rest of the machinery by a network of massive pipes. These were the reactor coolant pumps, keeping the water rushing around on its vital journey. Inside each metal casing, a 50-ton motor was spinning at the rate of 1,500 revs per minute.

The pumps were labeled north, south, east, and west. The south pump was going to be Ravi's primary target.

But first of all he crossed to the other side of the reactor chamber, to a door marked EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY. The two men had explained everything very carefully to him. There was no point attacking the reactor cap. Nothing could penetrate it. Nor was there any point in sabotaging the reactor chamber, not while it was locked down. Any blast, any radiation leak would be contained. To achieve their aims, an exit had to be found. The power of the nuclear reactor had to be set free.

And there it was on the blueprint they had shown him. The emergency air lock was the Achilles' heel in the fortification of Jowada. It should never have been built. There was no need for it and it had

never been used. The idea of a passageway between the reactor chamber and the back of the turbine hall, where it opened onto a patch of wasteland close to the perimeter fence, was to reassure workers that there was a fast way out should one ever be needed. But what it also provided was a single pathway from the reactor to the outside world. It was, in one sense, the barrel of a gun. All it needed was to be unblocked.

Nobody noticed Ravi as he strolled over to the emergency door, and even if they had, they wouldn't have remarked on it. Everyone had their own worksheet. They would assume he was just following his.

He opened the inner door—a solid metal plate—and let himself into the corridor. This was identical to the one he had used to enter, the same size and shape as a passageway in an underground train station—

only without the advertisements. About halfway along, there was a control panel fixed high up in the wall. Standing on tiptoe, Ravi unscrewed it, using one of the few real tools he had brought with him.

Inside, there was a complicated mass of circuitry, but he knew exactly what to do. He cut two wires, took one of them, and attached it to a third. It was quite easy, really. The exit door slid open in front of him, revealing a patch of blue sky on the other side of another wire fence. He felt the sluggish air roll in. Somewhere, perhaps in the control room, someone would notice what had happened. Even now a light might be blinking on one of the consoles. But it would take a while before anyone came to investigate and by then it would be too late.

Ravi went back into the reactor chamber and over to the nearest of the four reactor coolant pumps. This was the only way that wide-scale sabotage was possible. What he was aiming for was known in the nuclear industry as a LOCA—a Loss of Coolant Accident. It was a LOCA that had caused the catastrophe at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union and had almost done the same at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. The pump was locked in its cage, but Ravi had the key. That was one of the reasons he had been chosen for this job. The right man in the right place.

He stopped in front of the cylindrical wall, which rose more than sixty feet into the air. He could hear the machinery inside. The noise was constant and deafening. His mouth was dry now, thinking about what he was about to do. Was he insane? Suppose they traced this back to him? But then his mind drifted to all that money, to his wife, to the life they could finally lead. His family was not in Chennai today. He had sent them to friends in Bangalore. They would be safe. He was doing this for them.

He *had* to do this for them.

For a few brief seconds greed and fear hung in the balance, and then the scale tipped. He knelt down and placed the toolbox against the metal casing, opened it and removed the top shelf. The inside was almost filled with the bulk of the plastic explosive, yet there was just enough room for a digital display showing ten minutes, a tangle of wires, and a switch.

Ten minutes. That would be more than enough time to leave the chamber before the bomb went off. If anyone questioned him, he would say he needed to use the toilet. He would exit the same way he had come in, and once he was on the other side of the air lock, he would be safe. After the blast, there would be panic, alarms, a well-rehearsed evacuation, radiation suits for everyone. He would simply

join the crowds and make his way out. They would never be able to trace the bomb to him. There wouldn't be any evidence at all.

People might die. People he knew. Could he really do this?

The switch was right there in front of him. So small. All he had to do was flick it and the countdown would begin.

Ravi Chandra took a deep breath. He reached out with a single finger. He pressed the switch.

It was the last thing he did in his life. The men from the street corner had lied to him. There was no ten-minute delay. When he activated the bomb, it went off immediately, almost vaporizing him. Ravi was dead so quickly that he never even knew that he had been betrayed, that his wife was now a widow and that his children would never meet Mickey Mouse. Nor did he see the effect of what he had done.

Exactly as planned, the bomb tore a hole in the side of the coolant pump, smashing the rotors. There was a hideous metallic grinding as the entire thing tore itself apart. One of the other plant operators—the same man who had been chatting about cricket just a few minutes ago—was killed instantly, thrown off his feet and into the reactor pit. The other engineers in the chamber froze, their eyes filled with horror as they saw what was happening, then scattered, diving for cover. They were too late. There was another explosion and suddenly the air was filled with shrapnel, spinning fragments of metal and machinery that had been turned into vicious missiles. The two closest men were cut to pieces. The others turned to run for the air lock.

None of them made it. Alarms were already sounding, lights flashing, and as the machinery disintegrated, it seemed that everything in the chamber had been slowed down, turned into a black-and-red hell. A cable whipped down, trailing sparks. There were three more explosions, pipes wrenching themselves free, fireballs spinning outward, and then a roar as burning steam came rushing out like an express train, filling the chamber. The worst had happened. Jagged knives of broken metal had smashed open the pipes, and although the reactor was already closing down, there were still several tons of radioactive steam with nowhere to go. One man was caught in the full blast and disappeared with a single hideous scream.

The steam thundered out, filling the entire chamber. Normally, the walls and the dome would have contained it. But Ravi Chandra, in almost the last act of his life, had opened the emergency air lock.

Like some alien stampede, the steam found it and rushed through, out into the open air. All over the Jowada power station, systems were being shut down, corridors emptied, safety measures put into place.

But it was already too late.

The people of Chennai saw a huge plume of white smoke rise up into the air. They heard the alarms.

Already, workers at Jowada were calling their relatives in the city, warning them to get out. The panic began at once. More than a million men, women, and children dropped what they were doing and tried to find a way through traffic that had come to a complete standstill. Fights broke out. There were collisions and smashups at a dozen different junctions and traffic lights. But it had all happened

too quickly, and not a single person would have actually made it out of the city before the radioactive cloud, blown by a southerly wind, fell onto them.

The story appeared that night on television news all around the world.

It was estimated that at least a hundred people died in the one hour following the explosion. Of course, there had been casualties within the Jowada power station itself, but far more people were killed in the madness to get out of Chennai. By the following morning, the newspaper headlines were calling it “A NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE”—in capital letters, of course. The Indian authorities were adamant that the steam cloud would have contained only low-level radiation and that there was no need for panic, but there were just as many experts who disagreed.

Twenty-four hours later, an appeal was made to help the people of Chennai. Further casualties were being reported. Homes and shops had been looted. There were still riots in the streets and the army had been called in to restore order. The hospitals were full of desperate people. One British charity—it called itself First Aid—came forward with a comprehensive plan to distribute food, blankets, and, most important of all, potassium iodate tablets for every one of the eight million people of Chennai to counter possible radiation sickness.

As always, the world’s people were unfailing in their generosity, and by the end of the week First Aid had raised over two million dollars.

Of course, if the disaster had been any greater, they would have raised much, much more.

Chapter 2: REFLECTIONS IN A MIRROR

ALEX RIDER TOOK ONE last glance in the mirror, then stopped and looked a second time. It was strange, but he wondered if he recognized the boy who was looking back. There were the thin lips, the slightly chiseled nose and chin, the light brown hair hanging in two strands over the very dark brown eyes. He raised a hand and, obediently, his reflection did the same. But there was something different about this other Alex Rider. It wasn't quite him.

Of course, the clothes he was wearing didn't help. In a few minutes, he would be leaving for a New Year's Eve party being held at a castle on the banks of Loch Arkaig in the Highlands of Scotland—and the invitation had been clear. Dress: black tie. Reluctantly, Alex had gone out and rented the entire outfit ... dinner jacket, black trousers, and a white shirt with a wing collar that was too tight and squeezed his neck. The one thing he had refused to do was put on the polished leather shoes that the shopkeeper had insisted would make the outfit complete. Black sneakers would have to do. What did it all make him look like? he wondered as he straightened the bow tie for the tenth time. A young James Bond. He hated the comparison, but he couldn't avoid it.

It wasn't just the clothes. As Alex continued his examination, he had to admit that so much had happened in the last year that he'd almost lost track of who—and what—he was. Standing in front of the mirror, it was as if he had just stepped down from the merry-go-round that his life had become. He might be still, but the world around him was spinning.

Just two months ago, he had been in Australia ... not on vacation, not visiting relatives, but, incredibly, working for the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, disguised as an Afghan refugee. He had been sent to infiltrate the people-smuggling gang known as the snakehead, yet his mission had taken him much further than that, setting him against Major Winston Yu and the potential devastation of a huge bomb buried deep beneath a fault line in the earth's crust. It had also brought him face-to-face with his godfather, the man he had known only as Ash. Thinking about him now, Alex saw something spark in his eyes. Was it anger? Grief? Alex had never known his parents, and he'd thought Ash would somehow be able to explain where he'd come from, to make sense of his past. But his godfather had done nothing of the sort, and their meeting had led only to betrayal and death.

And that was really it, wasn't it? That was what the boy in the mirror was trying to tell him. He was still only fourteen years old, but the last year—a year whose end they were about to celebrate—had almost destroyed him. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel Major Yu's walking stick smashing into the side of his head, the crushing weight of the water under the Bora Falls, the punishment he had taken in the Thai boxing ring in Bangkok. And those were just the most recent in a string of injuries. How many times had he been punched, kicked, beaten, knocked out? And shot. His wounds might have healed, but he would still be reminded of them every time he undressed for bed. The scar left by the .22

bullet fired into his chest by a sniper on a rooftop on Liverpool Street would always be with him. Along with the memory of pain. They say that never leaves you either.

Had it changed him? Of course it had. Nobody could come through what he had and stay the same. And yet ...

“Alex! Stop admiring yourself in the mirror and get downstairs.” It was Sabina. Alex turned and saw her standing in the doorway, wearing a silver dress with lots of glitter around the collar. Her dark hair—

she had grown it long—was tied back. Unusually for her, she was wearing makeup: pale blue eye shadow and pink, glossy lipstick. “Dad’s waiting. We’re about to leave.”

“I’ll just be one minute.”

Alex twisted the bow tie again, wondering what he had to do to stop the darn thing from going crooked.

He looked ridiculous. Nobody under the age of fifty should have to dress like this. But at least he’d been able to resist Sabina’s suggestion that he should go to the party dressed in a kilt. She’d been teasing him about it since Christmas.

Despite everything, the last six weeks had been fantastic for Alex Rider. First of all, Sabina and her parents had unexpectedly arrived in England. Edward Pleasure was a journalist. He had almost been killed once, investigating the pop singer Damian Cray. Alex had blamed himself for that, and when, at the end of it all, Sabina had left for America, he had been certain he would never see her again. But now she was back in his life, and although she was a year older than him, the two had never been closer. It helped perhaps that she was one of the few people who knew about his involvement with MI6.

Better still, the Pleasures had invited Alex to join them for the New Year at the house they had rented in the West Highlands of Scotland. Hawk’s Lodge was a Victorian pile that had been named after an obscure poet rather than the bird. It stood, three stories high, on the edge of woodland with Ben Nevis in the background. It was the sort of house that needed roaring log fires, hot chocolate, old-fashioned board games, and too much to eat. Liz Pleasure, Sabina’s mother, had supplied all of this and more from the moment they had arrived. In the past few days, the four of them had gone hiking and fishing.

They had visited ruined castles and isolated villages and strolled along the famous white sands of Morar. Sabina had hoped it might snow—there was good skiing over at Aviemore and she had brought her gear with her—but although it was freezing outside, so far the weather had only managed a few flurries. There was no television in the house, and Edward had banned Sabina from bringing her Nintendo DS, so they had spent the evenings playing Scrabble or Perudo, the Peruvian game of liar dice, which Alex nearly always won. If there was one thing he had learned in his life, it was certainly how to lie.

Meanwhile, Jack Starbright, Alex’s housekeeper and in some ways still his closest friend, was in Washington, D.C. She had been invited to Scotland too, but had decided to go home for New Year with her parents. Following her out of the house, it had crossed Alex’s mind that one day she would go back to America for good. All her friends and family were there. He wondered what would happen to him if she did. She had looked after him since his uncle had died, and as far as he knew, there was nobody to take her place.

As if reading his thoughts, she had given him a hug while the taxi driver loaded up her suitcases.

“Don’t worry, Alex. I’ll see you in ten days. Just try and have a good time in Scotland. See if you can get past New Year without getting into trouble. Don’t forget, school starts on the sixth.”

And that was another reason to be cheerful. Alex had managed to complete an entire half term at Brookland without getting kidnapped, shot at, or recruited by one of the world’s security agencies. He had begun to feel like an ordinary schoolboy again, getting told off for talking in class, sweating over his homework, listening for the bell that meant the end of day.

He took one last look in the mirror. Jack was right. Forget all this spy stuff. He’d had enough of all that.

He was leaving it behind.

He went down two flights of stairs to the hall with its wood panels and rather gloomy paintings of Scottish wildlife. Edward Pleasure was waiting with Sabina. It seemed to Alex that the journalist had grown quite a lot older since they had last met. There were definitely more lines in his face, he now wore glasses all the time, and he had lost a lot of weight. He also limped, supporting himself with a heavy walking stick, metal tipped and with a metal handle shaped like a duck’s head. His wife had bought it for him in an antiques shop in London. She had joked that if any of the people he wrote about ever tried to attack him, at least he’d have something he could use to defend himself.

The journalist had put on his own black tie for the evening, but Alex saw at once from his expression that something was wrong.

“What is it?” Alex asked Sabina.

“Mum’s not coming,” Sabina replied. She was looking glum. All her enthusiasm for the party had drained away.

“She says she’s not feeling up to it,” Edward explained. “It’s nothing serious. She’s just got a bit of the flu ...”

“Then I think we should all stay,” Sabina said.

“That’s nonsense, Sabina. The three of you go and enjoy yourselves.” Liz Pleasure had appeared at one of the doorways. She was a pleasant, easygoing woman with long, straggly hair. She didn’t care how she looked and she liked to run a house without rules. Right now she was wearing a baggy jersey and jeans, holding a box of tissues. “I don’t much like parties anyway, and I’m certainly not going out in this weather.”

“But you don’t want to be here for New Year on your own.”

“I’m going to have a hot bath with some of that expensive oil your dad bought me for Christmas. Then I’m going to bed. I’ll be asleep long before midnight.” She went over to Sabina and put her arm around her. “Honestly, Sab, it doesn’t bother me. We can celebrate New Year tomorrow and you can tell me what I missed.”

“I don’t even want to go to this stupid party!”

“That’s not true. You love parties. And you look terrific ... both of you.”

“But Mum ...”

“You have to go. Your dad’s got the tickets and they cost a fortune.” She beamed at Alex. “You look after her, Alex. And remember: This is a party in a real Scottish castle. I’m sure you’re going to have a fantastic time.”

There was no point in any further argument, and twenty minutes later, Alex found himself being driven along the twisting roads that led north to Loch Arkaig. The weather had turned worse. The snow that Sabina had been hoping for was falling more heavily, swirling in front of the headlights as they cut through the night. Edward Pleasure was driving a Nissan X-Trail that he had rented at Inverness Airport. Alex was glad he had chosen a four-by-four. The snow was already settling. Any thicker and they would need the extra traction.

Sabina was stretched out in the back, untangling her iPod. Alex was in the front. It was the first time he had been alone with Edward Pleasure since the south of France, and he felt a little uncomfortable. The journalist must have known about his involvement with MI6. Sabina would have told him everything that had happened. But the two of them had never discussed it, as if it was somehow impolite.

“It’s good to have you with us, Alex,” Edward muttered. He was deliberately keeping his voice down so that Sabina, plugged into Coldplay, wouldn’t hear. “I know Sab was really glad you could tag along.”

“I’ve had a great time,” Alex said. He thought for a moment, then added, “I’m not sure about tonight, though.”

Edward smiled. “We don’t have to stay too long if you don’t want to. But what Liz said was right.

Nobody celebrates New Year like the Scottish. And Kilmore Castle is quite a place. Dates back to the thirteenth century. It was torn down in the Jacobite rising and stayed more or less in ruins until it was bought by Desmond McCain.”

“Isn’t he the man you’re writing about?”

“That’s right. He’s the main reason we’re going. The Reverend Desmond McCain.” Edward reached down and flicked a switch, blowing hot air over the window. The windshield wipers were doing their best, but snow was still sticking to the glass. It was warm and cozy inside the car, in marked contrast with the world outside. “He’s an interesting man, Alex. Do you want to hear about him?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, you’ve probably read a bit about him in the papers. He was brought up in an orphanage in east London. No parents. No family. Nothing. He’d been abandoned in a shopping cart, wrapped in a plastic bag ... McCain Frozen Fries. That’s how he got his name. He was fostered by a couple in Hackney, and from that moment things started going better for him. He did well at school ... particularly at sports. By the time he was eighteen, he had become a famous boxer. He won the WBO world middleweight title twice, and everyone thought he’d make it a hat trick before he got knocked out in the first round by Buddy Sangster in Madison Square Garden in 1983.”

“What happened to Buddy Sangster?” Alex asked. He’d heard the name somewhere before.

“It’s funny you should ask. He died a year later. He fell under a train in the New York subway. They showed his funeral on TV. One of his fans even sent a hundred black tulips to the funeral. I remember hearing that ...” Edward shook his head. “Anyway, Desmond McCain wasn’t boxing anymore. His jaw had been smashed up pretty badly. He went to some plastic surgeon in Las Vegas, but it was a botch job and it never healed properly. To this day he eats only soft food. He can’t chew. But it wasn’t the end of his career. He went into business ... property development, and he was very good at it.

There were a dozen tenants in Rotherhithe, down on the River Thames, and somehow he persuaded them to sell cheaply to him, and then he knocked down their houses and put up a bunch of skyscrapers and made a fortune.

“That was about the time that he became interested in politics. He’d given thousands of dollars to the Conservative party, and suddenly he announced he wanted to be a member of Parliament. Of course, they welcomed him with open arms. He was rich, he was successful—and he was black. That was part of it too. And the next thing you know, he managed to get himself elected in a corner of London that hadn’t voted Conservative since the nineteenth century, and even then it had only been by mistake.

People liked him. It was the typical rags-to-riches story ... you could say plastic bag to riches in his case. He got a big majority, and a year later he was a minister in the department of sport. There was even talk that he could become our first black prime minister.”

“So what went wrong?”

Edward sighed. “Everything! It turned out that his business hadn’t been going as well as people thought. One or two of his developments had fallen behind schedule, and he had huge financial problems. The bank was closing in and it looked as if he might go bankrupt ... and of course you’re not allowed to be a member of Parliament if that happens. Too unsightly for their taste. God knows what he was thinking, but he decided to set fire to one of his properties and claim the insurance. That was his way out of the mess. Well, the property in question was a twenty-four-story office building overlooking St. Paul’s, and one night it simply burned to the ground. The next day, McCain put in a claim for fifty million dollars. Problem solved.”

They came to a sharp bend in the road and Edward Pleasure slowed down. By now the whole road was snow covered, with dark pine trees looming up on both sides.

“At least that’s what he thought,” he went on. “Unfortunately for him, the insurance company smelled a rat. They started asking questions. Like, for example, why had the alarms been switched off? Why had the security staff been given the night off? There was a lot of gossip in the press—and then, suddenly, a witness turned up. It turned out there’d been a homeless person sleeping in the underground garage. He’d actually been there when McCain drove in with six gallons of gasoline and a cigarette lighter. He’d been lucky to get away alive. Anyway, McCain was arrested. There was a fairly sensational trial. He was sent to prison for nine years.”

Alex had listened to all this in silence. “You called him Reverend McCain,” he said.

“Well, that’s the strange thing. In a way, McCain’s whole life had been bizarre—but while he was in jail, he converted to Christianity. He did a correspondence course and became a priest in some church no one’s ever heard of. And when he got out—that was five years ago—he didn’t go back into business or politics. He said he’d spent his whole life being selfish and that he wanted to put all that behind him.

Instead, he set up a charity. First Aid. That’s what it’s called. It provides a rapid response to emergencies all over the world.”

“How much farther?” Sabina’s voice came from the backseat. She was still plugged into her earphones.

Edward Pleasure held up a hand and opened it twice, signaling ten minutes.

“You interviewed him,” Alex said.

“Yes. I’ve done a big piece for *Vanity Fair*. They’ll be publishing it next month.”

“And?”

“You’ll meet him tonight, Alex, and you can see for yourself. He’s got an enormous amount of energy and he’s channeled it into helping people less fortunate than himself. He’s raised millions for famine relief in Africa, bush fires in Australia, floods in Malaysia ... even that accident in southern India.

Jowada ...”

Alex nodded. He’d read about it when he’d been working as a ball boy at Wimbledon. It had made the front pages. “The nuclear reactor ... ,” he said.

Edward nodded. “For a time it looked as if the whole city of Chennai could have been affected.

Fortunately, it wasn’t as bad as that, but a lot of people were killed in the panic. First Aid was up and running the very next day, getting antiradiation stuff to the women and kids, helping with supplies ...

that sort of thing. Nobody was quite sure how they got off the mark so quickly, but that’s how they work. Instant response. Their aim is to be the first charity in.”

“And you really think this man, McCain, is genuine? That he’s turned a new leaf?”

“You mean ... do I think he’s another Damian Cray?” Edward smiled briefly. It had been his article exposing Cray as a maniac that had almost got him killed. “Well, I did have my doubts when I first met him. I mean, even if he wasn’t a crook, he was a politician, which didn’t exactly recommend him. But you don’t need to worry, Alex. I did plenty of research into his charity. I interviewed him and a lot of people who know him. I spoke to the police and I opened many old files. The truth is, other than his past, I couldn’t find anything bad to write about him. He really does seem to be a rich man who made a bad mistake and who’s trying to make up for it.”

“How has he managed to buy a castle? If he went bankrupt ...”

“That’s a good question. After he went to prison, he lost all his money ... everything. But he had powerful friends—both in business and in politics—and they did what they could to help him out.

Thanks to them, he managed to hang on to Kilmore Castle. He also has a London apartment, and he's the part owner of a safari camp somewhere in Kenya." A car suddenly appeared in the road beside them, overtaking. Edward slowed down to let it pass. He watched as it was swallowed up by the whirling snow. "I'll be interested to hear what you think of McCain," he muttered.

"Is that why you're going?"

"When I met him, I mentioned I was planning to be in Scotland for the New Year, and he invited me. He gave me the tickets, which is just as well, since they cost one thousand dollars each."

Alex let out a low whistle.

"Well, it's for charity. All the profits will go to First Aid. There'll be a lot of rich people there tonight.

They'll raise a fortune."

There was another brief silence. The road had begun to climb steeply uphill, and Edward shifted down a gear.

"We never really talked about Damian Cray," Edward muttered.

Alex twisted in his seat. "There's nothing to say."

"My book about him sold a million copies. But I never mentioned you, or your part in what happened."

"I prefer it that way."

"You saved Sabina's life."

"She saved mine."

"Can I give you some advice, Alex?" Edward Pleasure had to keep his eyes on the road, yet just for a moment he turned them on Alex. "Stay away from all that. MI6, intelligence, all the rest of it. I've got a good idea what's been going on over the past year. Sabina's told me some of it, but I have contacts in the CIA and I hear things. I don't want to know what you've been through, but believe me, you're better off out of it."

"Don't worry." Alex remembered what he'd been thinking back at Hawk's Lodge. "I don't think MI6 are interested in me anymore. They didn't even send me a Christmas card. That part of my life is over.

And I'm glad."

The road was even steeper now, and the trees had fallen away on one side to reveal an expanse of black water, Loch Arkaig, stretching out below. It was still snowing, but the flakes didn't seem to be making contact with the half-frozen surface, as if the two were somehow canceling each other out. The loch was said to have its own monster—a giant water horse—and looking down, Alex could well believe it.

Loch Arkaig had been left behind by the glaciers. Twelve miles long and in places three hundred feet

deep, who could say what secrets it had managed to keep to itself for the past five million years?

And there was Kilmore Castle looming up above him, almost invisible behind the sweeping snow. It had been built on a rocky outcrop, above the loch, completely dominating the surrounding landscape, a massive pile of gray stone with towers and battlements, narrow, slit-like windows, soaring archways, and solid, unwelcoming doors. There was nothing about the place that could have been built for comfort. It existed only to rule and to keep those inside it in power. It was hard to imagine how it had ever fallen or, for that matter, how it had been built. Even the Nissan X-Trail, with its 2.5-liter four-cylinder turbo diesel engine, seemed to be struggling as it negotiated the series of tight hairpin bends that were the only way up. Had soldiers once come here on horseback? What medieval weapons could possibly have penetrated these massive walls?

They were in a line of traffic now with other partygoers, just visible behind the frosted windows of their cars. The last bend brought them to a wide-open space that had been converted into a parking lot with attendants in Day-Glo jackets frantically signaling where to go. Two fiery torches had been placed on either side of the main entrance, the flames fighting the snow. Men and women in heavy coats, their faces lost behind scarves, were hurrying across the gravel and bundling themselves in. There was something almost nightmarish about the scene. It didn't look like a party. These people could have been refugees running for their lives from some freak act of nature. All the while dressed to kill.

Edward Pleasure parked the car and Sabina took off her iPod.

“We don't have to stay until midnight,” Edward told her. “If you want to leave earlier, just let me know.”

“I wish Mum had come,” Sabina muttered.

“Me too. But let's try and enjoy ourselves.”

They got out of the car, and after the warmth of the interior, Alex was immediately hit by the deep chill of the night, the snow dancing in his eyes, the wind rushing through his hair. He had no coat and ran forward, hugging himself, using his shoulders to battle through the elements. It was as if the very worst of the winter had somehow been concentrated on this rocky platform, high above the loch. The flames of the fiery torches writhed and twisted. Somebody shouted something, but the words were snatched away.

And then they had reached the archway and passed through into an inner courtyard, where at least the wind couldn't penetrate. Alex found himself in an irregularly shaped space with high walls, cannons, a lawn under two inches of snow, and a huge bonfire. About a dozen guests were crowding around, feeling the warmth, and laughing as they brushed snow off their sleeves. A second archway stood ahead of him, this one with carved eagles and an inscription in Gaelic, the letters glowing red and shimmering in the light of the fire.

“What's that?” Sabina asked.

Edward shrugged, but next to him one of the other guests had overheard. “It's the motto of the Kilmore

clan,” he explained. “This was their ancestral home. They were here for three hundred years.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“Yes. ‘You cannot defeat your enemies until you know who they are.’ ” The guest pushed forward and disappeared into the castle.

Alex looked at the inscription for a moment. He wondered if in some way it wasn’t speaking to him.

Then he dismissed the thought. A New Year was about to begin and with it a new set of rules. There were no more enemies. That was what he had decided.

“Come on, Alex ...”

Sabina grabbed his arm and together they went in.

Chapter 3: CARDS BEFORE MIDNIGHT

ALEX HAD NEVER BEEN to a party like it.

The banqueting hall at Kilmore Castle was huge, but even so, it was jammed with people: five or six hundred of them had been invited and this wasn't an invitation anyone was going to turn down, even if it came with a thousand-dollar price tag. Within minutes, Alex had recognized half a dozen TV

celebrities and soap stars, a clutch of politicians, two celebrity chefs, and a pop star. The men were in black tie or kilts. The women had fought to outdo each other with yards of silk and velvet, plunging necklines, and a dazzling assortment of diamonds and jewels.

A whole army of waiters in full Scottish dress were fighting their way through the crowd carrying trays of vintage champagne while a trio of bagpipe players performed on a gallery above. There were no electric lights. More than a hundred candles flickered in two massive chandeliers. Torches blazed from iron braziers mounted in the walls. The center of the room was dominated by a massive stone fireplace with flames leaping up the chimney and throwing red shadows across the flagstone floor.

The Kilmores hadn't lived at the castle for centuries, but they were certainly there tonight. Life-size portraits hung on the walls ... grim-looking men with swords and shields, proud-eyed women in tartan and bonnets. Suits of armor had been placed in many of the alcoves, and crossed swords stood guard over every archway and door. The animals they had killed—stags, foxes, wild boar—looked down on the scene with their disembodied heads and glass eyes. Coats of arms dotted the walls, the fireplace, even the windows.

Desmond McCain must have spent a fortune on the party, ensuring that at the very least his guests would get value for their money. A buffet table reached from one end of the hall to the other, piled high with great slabs of beef and salads, whole salmon, venison, and—on a giant silver platter—a roast suckling pig complete with angry eyes and an apple in its mouth. There were dozens of different wines and spirits, punch bowls, and as many as fifty brands of malt whisky in bottles of various shapes. One archway led to a dance floor, another to a fully equipped casino with roulette, blackjack, and poker.

Somehow, McCain had managed to park a brand-new Mini Convertible in the hallway. It was the first prize in a raffle that also included a Kawasaki 260X Jet Ski and a two-week Caribbean cruise—all of them had been given free to First Aid by wealthy sponsors.

Outside, the snow was still falling. The wind was cutting through the night like a scalpel. But all that was forgotten as, inside, the guests enjoyed the warmth of each other's company and the spirit of the celebration as the minutes ticked down to the New Year.

And yet, despite all this, Alex and Sabina felt out of place. Not many other teenagers had been invited, and the ones they met all lived locally, seemed to be at least six feet tall, and clearly regarded them as outsiders. Alex and Sabina ate together, had a couple of sodas, and made their way to the dance floor—

but even here they didn't feel comfortable, surrounded by adults twisting and swaying to music that

hadn't been popular in decades.

"I've had enough of this," Sabina announced as the band lurched into an ABBA classic.

Alex knew what she meant. The center of the dance floor was dominated by three bald men in kilts, jabbing their fingers into the air to the tune of "Money, Money, Money." He glanced at his watch. It was only ten past eleven. "I don't think we can leave yet, Sabina," he said.

"Have you seen my dad?"

"He was talking to one of the politicians."

"Probably hoping to get a story. He never stops."

"Come on, Sabina. Cheer up. This place is meant to be hundreds of years old. Let's go and explore."

They pushed their way off the dance floor and headed down the nearest corridor. The stone walls twisted around, and the music and the noise of the party were cut off almost at once. Another corridor led off of it, this one decorated with tapestries and heavy gilt mirrors with glass blackened by age. At the end, they came to a staircase that led to one of the towers, and suddenly they found themselves outside, surrounded by a low brick wall, looking out into the white-spotted blackness that the night had become.

"That's better," Sabina said. "I was suffocating in there."

"Are you cold?" Alex could see the snow falling gently onto her bare neck and shoulders.

"I'll be all right for a minute."

"Here." He took off his jacket and handed it to her.

"Thanks." She slipped it on. There was a pause. "I wish I didn't have to go back to America," she said.

The words jolted Alex. He had forgotten momentarily that she would be returning in a few days' time.

She'd enrolled at a school in San Francisco, where the family was living, and it would be a while before they saw each other again. He'd miss her. The thought saddened him. He'd seen so much of Sabina over the Christmas break that he'd gotten used to having her around. "Maybe I could come over for the Easter holidays," he said.

"Have you been to San Francisco?"

"Once. My uncle took me on a business trip. At least, that's what he told me. He was probably working with the CIA, spying on someone or something."

"Do you ever think about Damian Cray?"

"No." Alex shook his head. The question seemed to have come out of nowhere. Alex glanced at Sabina and was surprised to see that she was looking at him with something close to anger in her eyes.

"I do. All the time. It was horrible. He was crazy. And the way he died! I'll remember that for the rest

of my life.”

Well, that made sense. Sabina had been there at the very end. In fact, she had been at least partly responsible for his sensational death.

“I thought you said you were going to stop all that,” she went on. “Playing at being a spy ...”

“It was never my choice,” Alex replied. “And anyway, I’ve already told your dad. I’ve stopped. It’s not going to happen again.”

Sabina sighed. “San Francisco’s great,” she said. “Great shops. Great food. Great weather. But I miss England.” She paused. “I miss you.”

“I’ll come visit. I promise.”

“You’d better... .”

They had only been outside for a couple of minutes, but in this weather it was more than enough. Alex could see the flakes of snow in Sabina’s hair. “Let’s go downstairs,” he suggested.

“Yeah. Let’s find Dad and get out of here. I’ll go back to the main hall. You look in the other rooms. I want to get back to Mum, and if you ask me, this party sucks. All these men in kilts and not one of them with decent legs ...”

She handed him back his jacket and the two of them made their way back down the twisting staircase, then split up, searching for Edward Pleasure. Alex watched Sabina hurry down the corridor, then went the other way, past more unsmiling portraits of long-dead ancestors. He wondered why anyone would want to live in a place like this. Maybe Desmond McCain needed somewhere to hide from the world.

When he wasn’t trying to save it.

He heard the murmur of voices, the clink of a glass, and a woman laughing. He had come to a set of double doors, opening into what must be the castle’s library, with shelves of leather-bound books that looked at least a hundred years old and which were surely never read. He saw at once that the library had been converted into a casino, with card tables, a spinning roulette wheel, and croupiers in white shirts, waistcoats, and bow ties. As he walked in, the roulette ball tumbled into its slot with a loud clunk, the audience laughed and applauded, and the croupier called out “Eighteen, red, even ...” and began to sort out the bets. There were almost a hundred people playing the different games, most of them holding drinks and one or two of them puffing at cigars. This must be the only room in the castle where smoking was allowed; a cloud of smoke hung in the air.

Alex didn’t even notice himself entering the room, so spellbound was he. He looked briefly at the cards sliding across the green baize, the fresh bets stacking up in front of the roulette wheel, the men and women, some standing, some sitting, leaning forward, their faces flushed with excitement. The main focus of attention seemed to be at the far end of the room. There was a game in progress with six players—but one of them had just lost. Alex saw him throw his cards down with disgust and get up, leaving an empty chair. At the same time the winning player laughed a deep, rich sound that warmed the room.

Desmond McCain. It had to be him. Alex would have known it even if he hadn't been the only black man in the room. McCain was lolling back in his chair in front of a great window that had the effect of framing him, putting him at the center of the picture. Almost despite himself, Alex moved forward to get a closer look. He had been thinking about McCain only a few minutes ago. It couldn't hurt to see what the laird of Kilmore Castle was really like.

McCain was gathering up his cards, which almost disappeared in his oversized hands. He was a huge man with an extraordinary presence that somehow drew Alex to him. He was completely bald, with a round, polished head that had surely never seen a single hair. His eyes were a strange shade of gray—they were dark yet alight with electricity—and his smile was quite simply dazzling. Like everyone else, he was dressed in black tie, but unlike so many of the others, he looked completely comfortable, as if he always dressed this way.

He picked up a glass of whisky, which he drank as if it were a cocktail, using a straw at the side of his mouth, and Alex remembered what Edward Pleasure had told him about the boxing injury. It was true.

The man he was looking at had received a blow that had permanently dislocated his jaw. Worse than that, it had been put back together in such a way that it no longer fit properly. It was as if someone had taken a photograph of his head, cut it horizontally in half, and then reattached the two pieces a few millimeters apart. His eyes and nose were no longer exactly over his mouth.

And there was something else. McCain said something, turned his head, and laughed a second time.

That was when Alex saw it. He was wearing a silver crucifix, not around his neck but on his ear. It was less than a centimeter high, pinned into the lobe. The jewelry was quite striking set against the intense, dark skin. This was a man who wore his faith openly, who dared you to argue against it.

Alex drew closer. The six of them had been playing a version of poker—Texas Hold 'Em—in which five cards turned faceup are used by everyone at the table. And the stakes couldn't have been higher.

Alex saw this at once from the number of different-colored chips spilling over the table—each one marked \$50, \$100, even \$500. Each chip had been bought at its face value. The casino was using real money. Alex could feel the tension in the air. A scattering of cards, a few minutes' playing time, and thousands of dollars could be changing hands. At the moment, McCain was clearly in the lead.

There was a whole mountain of chips stacked up in front of him, and only one of the players—a man with a shock of silver hair and a thick, fleshy face—came anywhere close.

McCain looked up and noticed Alex. At once the smile was there, drawing him in, making him feel that the two of them had known each other for years.

“Good evening,” he boomed. “Welcome to the Kilmore Casino. You're frankly a little young to be gambling, I'd have said. What's your name?”

“Alex. Alex Rider.”

“And I'm Desmond McCain. We're just about to play the last hand. Why don't you join us? It's all for a good cause, so I think we can turn a blind eye to the age limit.” He gestured at the seat that had just

been vacated. Alex could already hear that his broken jaw made it difficult for him to speak. Words beginning with *f* or *r* came out slightly blurred. “The cards have been quite interesting this evening.

Let’s see if they have anything more to say before midnight.”

Alex knew he was making a mistake. He was meant to be looking for Edward Pleasure. He had agreed with Sabina. They were going to leave. But it was almost as if McCain had challenged him. If he walked away now, he would look like some little kid who was out of his depth. McCain had won the last hand and was neatly stacking up all the chips, including those of the man who had just left. Alex took his chair and sat down.

“Good!” McCain beamed at him. “Do you know the rules of Texas Hold ’Em?”

Alex nodded.

“We’re taking this very seriously. It costs five hundred dollars to join the table—that money goes straight to First Aid—and minimum bets are fifty dollars. Have you brought your pocket money with you?”

A couple of the other players laughed. Alex ignored them. “I didn’t bring any money at all,” he said.

“Then we’ll waive the entrance fee and I’ll stake you. This is the last hand of the evening, so one thousand dollars ought to be enough.” He slid the chips over. “It makes it more fun with more people.

And you never know. You could win enough to buy yourself a new PlayStation!”

With Alex making up the numbers, there would be six players at the table: three men, two women, and him. McCain was at one end with a dark-haired woman—Alex vaguely recognized her as a television reporter—at his side. Then came an elderly man who could have been a retired soldier, sitting rigidly with a straight back and a face fixed in concentration. The silver-haired man came next. He reminded Alex of an accountant or a banker. The circle was completed by a Scottish woman with ginger hair, sipping champagne even though it was clear she’d already had more than enough.

The croupier shuffled the deck and each player was dealt two cards, facedown. These were known as the “hole cards.” Alex had learned the basics of the game, playing with Ian Rider and Jack Starbright at an age when other children were probably reading Dick and Jane. Texas Hold ’Em is largely a game of bluff. You try to make pairs, three of a kind, a full house, and so on. But everything depends on your hidden cards. They may be great. They may be terrible. The secret is to make sure no one guesses either way.

Alex watched as McCain raised the corners of his cards with a thumb and smiled, not even attempting to conceal his pleasure. Of course, it was possible that he was bluffing, but Alex got the sense that this wasn’t a man who was too clever when it came to hiding his emotions. He must have something good under there ... high cards or a pair. Alex examined his own cards. There was nothing to get excited about, but he kept his own face blank.

“Come on, then,” McCain said.

The croupier was a pale, serious-looking man in his late twenties. He looked uncomfortable having a teenager in the game, but dealt three more cards—“the flop”—faceup on the table. All six players

would use these cards to try to create the best hand possible. The first one out was the jack of diamonds, a face card. Then came the seven of hearts. The third card drew a slight murmur from the people gathered around. It was the ace of spades. This was going to be an expensive game.

The betting began.

Alex looked at all the money he had been given, thinking there must be better ways to spend a thousand dollars. McCain started the bidding with two hundred dollars, and the reporter folded at once.

“There’s no point playing against you, Desmond,” she said. She had a thick Scottish accent. “You always win.”

“We are all running in the race,” McCain said. “But only one receives the prize.” He laughed briefly. “That’s Corinthians, chapter nine, verse twenty-four.” He turned to the soldier. “Are you in, Hamilton?”

Hamilton also folded. The accountant, Alex, and the ginger-haired woman all slid their \$100 chips in front of them.

Two more cards. Two more bets. By the time the last card had been dealt, this was what Alex was looking at, spread out on the green baize surface:

There were just three players remaining. The other woman had folded, leaving Alex, the accountant, and McCain to fight it out. The fact that the ace of spades had now been joined by a pair of jacks sitting faceup on the table made this an even more extraordinary game. McCain had asked if the cards had anything to say, and it seemed that they were screaming. If this had been a real casino, the betting might have climbed to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even so, it was going to get expensive. Alex had just \$700 left, yet the accountant had almost as much as McCain. And, even with such high sums, it was obvious that there was more to this than money. McCain was still relaxed, still smiling—yet he really wanted to win the game. It was his party, his castle, his evening. It was a matter of personal pride.

And the other people in the room had sensed it too. Alex realized that the roulette wheel had stopped spinning. Everyone had gathered around the table to watch this strange contest—two men, a boy, and five white rectangles that, combined with the turned-down cards, could mean so much or so little.

“Interesting cards,” McCain muttered. “If either of you have another ace, you’ll have two pairs. You could win the entire pot ...”

Why had he said that, Alex wondered. The odds of two pairs at poker are not huge. Why even mention it? Was he perhaps challenging them? Or could it be that he was trying to divert their attention?

Suppose he had three of a kind ...

“I’ll tell you what,” McCain went on with a fast check of his watch. “It’s the last game of the evening, so why don’t we have a bit of fun?”

McCain lifted his hands theatrically, touched the two thumb tips together, then laid his palms flat on the table. There was a stir from the audience as he used the wedge to slide all his chips forward, the

piles collapsing on top of one another as at least fifteen thousand dollars' worth of chips were spread across the table. One or two people clapped. Everyone knew what was happening here. It was all or nothing.

This was one of those games that any serious gambler would remember for the rest of his life.

"I'm going to make it easy for you," McCain said. He ran a hand across his jaw as if he were trying to smooth it back into place. "I know the two of you don't have enough money to match my bet, but I'm feeling charitable." He smiled at his own joke. "Put all your money in and we'll call it even."

The accountant drummed his fingers on the table. "Are you trying to pretend you've got the third jack, Desmond?" he asked. He had a clipped, nasal way of speaking. His eyes were small and almost colorless; Alex watched them dart from McCain to the cards on the table and somehow knew that he was about to make a mistake. "I think you're bluffing," he went on. "You're just trying to scare us away. Well, it's not going to work." He slid his own pile into the center, the plastic chips mingling with McCain's. He'd added about ten thousand dollars of his own.

Twenty-five thousand dollars! Any thought of charity had suddenly disappeared. It was a fantastic sum of money to be determined by the turn of two cards.

Alex glanced at his own pile of chips. It looked pathetic in comparison with the others, but he assumed McCain's invitation extended to him. "I'm in," he said.

"All right, Leo!" McCain nodded at the accountant. "Let's see what you've got."

The accountant flicked over his two cards. There was a mutter of approval from the spectators. He did indeed have another ace—the ace of diamonds—plus a two of spades. Adding them to the faceup cards gave him two pairs—aces and jacks—a very good hand. McCain really would need three of a kind to do better.

It should have been Alex's turn to show his cards next, yet McCain ignored him. "Too bad, Leo!" he crowed. "'God hath delivered you into my hand'—as it says in the first book of Samuel, chapter twenty-three." The silver crucifix glimmered briefly as he leaned forward and picked up his cards. He paused for a moment, then turned them over, one at a time. The first card was the jack of clubs. Three of a kind. It beat Leo easily. But then came the real triumph. He turned over the second card to reveal the other black jack—the jack of spades. The audience exploded. The odds of getting four of a kind in Texas Hold 'Em are 4,165 to 1. It was incredible luck. It was almost miraculous.

Now Alex understood why McCain had talked about two pairs. He had actually been underselling himself to draw the other players in. And the tactic, at least in part, had worked.

"I have the knaves and that makes it my evening," McCain roared. His eyes were bright with pleasure.

He leaned forward and began to sweep all the chips toward him.

"What about my cards?" Alex said quietly.

"Your cards?" McCain blinked. He had forgotten Alex was even there. He glanced down at the table as if to reassure himself. Nothing could beat four jacks, not with only one ace showing on the table ... could it? He relaxed. "Do forgive me, Alex," he said. "I should have let you show your cards first."

But everyone here would love to see them. What have you got?"

Alex waited a moment. He was aware that everyone was watching him. But for some reason he wanted McCain to remember this. Maybe it was just that he didn't like being taken for granted.

He turned over the eight of hearts. And then the ten of hearts.

There was a long silence as the truth sank in. Then the audience gasped. The seven of hearts, the nine of hearts, and the jack of hearts were already on the table, faceup. Put them together with Alex's cards and he had a straight flush ... seven, eight, nine, ten, and jack of hearts. And in the rules of poker, a straight flush beats four of a kind.

Alex had won.

McCain froze with his hands still cradling the chips, and in that moment Alex stared at all the chips spread out in front of him. They were all his! He had just won more money than he had owned in his whole life. But even so, he regretted what he had done. McCain was his host. This was meant to be his big night. Yet he had just been shown up in front of a large crowd of his friends by an unknown fourteen-year-old. How would he take it? Alex glanced up. McCain was staring across the table with raw anger in his eyes.

"I'm sorry ... ," Alex began.

McCain slammed his hands together as if to break the mood. At the same time, he leaned back and roared with laughter. "Well, there's a lesson in pride," he exclaimed loudly, for everyone to hear. "I jumped in too quickly. I was too sure of myself, and it seems I've been undone by a child I don't even remember inviting. Never mind! Alex, you've beaten me fair and square." He used his huge hands to push the chips away as if trying to distance himself from them. "You can cash in your chips with the croupier. I bet you must be the richest thirteen-year-old in Scotland right now."

"Actually, I'm fourteen," Alex said. "And I don't want the money. You can give it all to First Aid."

That drew a round of applause from the audience. McCain stood up. "That's very generous of you," he said. "Donating my own money to my own charity!" He was joking, but there was an edge to his voice.

"I can promise you it will be well spent." He moved away from the table, a few people patting him on the back as he left.

Alex glanced down one last time at McCain's cards: the knaves, as he had called them. They were strangely ugly—almost like freaks, joined at the chest, with flowing hair and strange multicolored tunics.

Scowling knaves versus his own brave hearts. But of course, it didn't mean anything. They were only cards, and even as he watched, they were swept away and shuffled back into the deck.

Chapter 4: OFF-ROAD VEHICLE

TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS.

Even as he made his way back into the main body of the castle, Alex thought about what he had just done. It had been an awful lot of money to give away without thinking. He could have held back a little of it, bought something for Jack or Sabina.

He shook his head, annoyed with himself. Charity was what the evening was all about. The money wasn't his and never had been. He remembered the look of anger in Desmond McCain's eyes as Alex had revealed his straight flush. McCain might be a born-again Christian, but he hadn't liked being beaten and somehow Alex doubted that he was going to be invited back.

Sabina had disappeared, but Alex stumbled across Edward Pleasure in yet another of the castle's many passageways, leaning on his walking stick while he talked on his BlackBerry. There was a spiral staircase just behind him, leading up to the next floor.

He closed up the phone as Alex approached. "That was Liz," he said. "She's not feeling any better and I'm beginning to think we ought to head back after all ..."

"That's fine with me," Alex said. "In fact, Sabina was looking for you. She wants to leave too."

It was half past eleven. In just thirty minutes there would be the countdown to midnight, balloons, more champagne, and a chorus of "Auld Lang Syne" before what had been described as the biggest fireworks display in Scotland. Guests were already streaming past, making their way into the main room. But Alex didn't mind missing it. There was something about Kilmore Castle that he found unsettling. Maybe it was the fact that it was so ancient and remote, perched high above the loch as if it didn't want to belong to the twenty-first century. He would be glad to see in the New Year somewhere else.

"Let's wait here for Sabina," Mr. Pleasure said. "She's bound to turn up sooner or later."

Neither of them spoke. Alex could hear music coming from the dance floor—now they'd shifted into Michael Jackson. A few more guests hurried past. One of them recognized him from the casino and smiled at him. Once again, the two of them were alone.

"So, are you looking forward to school?" Edward asked, as much to fill the silence as anything else.

"Yes. I am." If the question had taken Alex by surprise, so did the answer. He really was looking forward to the start of the spring term. He felt safe at school. He felt normal.

"What was that essay you were working on?"

Alex had brought homework with him to Scotland. After taking so much time off, he was trying as best he could to catch up. "I'm doing a project about GM crops," he said.

"GM?"

"You know ... genetically modified. It's something we've been looking at in biology. How scientists

can muck around with crops and make them do different things.” Alex dredged his mind, trying to remember what he’d been learning the term before. “It’s something Prince Charles is always going on about,” he said. “He’s afraid they’ll accidentally destroy the world.”

“The real problem with GM crops could be the corporations who end up controlling them,” Edward said. “Have you heard of the terminator gene?”

Alex shook his head.

“It’s something they’ve built into plants that effectively turns them off. It stops them from reproducing. So if you want more wheat or barley or whatever, you have to go back to the same company and pay them. You see what I mean? Whoever controls the genes could end up controlling the world’s economy.

It might be a good subject for me to write about myself. The real danger of genetically modified food .
.
.”

There was the sound of footsteps coming down the spiral staircase and suddenly Desmond McCain was there, pacing toward them. Sitting at the card table, Alex hadn’t realized how big the man was. He was almost seven feet tall, built like an American football player, with oversized shoulders and arms. Given his life story, he must have been at least fifty years old, but he looked much younger. He obviously still kept himself in shape.

Edward Pleasure turned around and recognized him. “Reverend McCain!” he exclaimed.

“Mr. Pleasure ...” McCain came to a halt. Alex saw a hard-to-read emotion pass over his face. His eyes, ever so briefly, clouded over as the zigzag that was his mouth stretched tight. Then, just as quickly, the expression of unease was gone. He smiled. “I’m very glad you could make it to my little affair,” he said. He gestured at Alex. “Are the two of you together by any chance?”

“Yes. Have you met?”

“Alex and I were playing cards just a few minutes ago.” McCain’s smile remained, but it seemed a little strained and artificial. “If I’d known he was your guest, perhaps I wouldn’t have been so rash with my betting. He actually cleaned me out.” They were now all standing on the same level, but McCain still loomed over them. “How is the article?” he asked.

“It’s finished.”

“I hope it won’t contain any unpleasant surprises.”

“You won’t have long to wait. It should be out next month.”

“Have you delivered it?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m looking forward to reading it.” McCain examined the journalist as if it was his mind that he was trying to read. For a moment neither of them spoke. Then McCain blinked as if he had suddenly lost interest. “But now you must forgive me,” he said. “I have a speech to make. Thank you so much for

coming to Kilmore Castle. It was very good to see you again. And a pleasure to meet you, Alex.”

He swept past them in the direction of the banqueting hall. Edward Pleasure was looking puzzled.

“What was all that about?” he asked.

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know.” He hesitated. “I thought he looked upset about something. . . .”

“I thought so too.”

“Maybe he’s worried about what you’re going to write.”

“He shouldn’t be. I’ve already told you. I had nothing bad to say. Actually, I think he’s quite a remarkable man. Take tonight for example. All these people have come here because of him. And it’s all for charity. He never rests.”

He stopped as Sabina appeared, hurrying down the corridor toward them. “Dad!” she said. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

Edward Pleasure put an arm around her. “We’re leaving,” he said. “Mum’s still awake. We can toast the New Year when we get in.”

They had no choice but to leave through the banqueting hall. By now all the guests had assembled and were standing together, champagne glasses in hand, facing the gallery where the bagpipe players had been performing and where McCain was about to make his speech. At least nobody would notice the three of them as they left early. Alex and Sabina followed Edward Pleasure and they made their way down the side of the buffet table—which had been partly cleared—on their way out.

There was a sudden fanfare, a single trumpeter standing at the back of the hall, his instrument glowing golden in the candlelight. The notes echoed across the chamber and the guests stopped talking and looked up expectantly. McCain appeared on the gallery. Two of the Highland pipers walked behind him, flanking him, a guard of honor. Alex couldn’t help wondering if they were about to burst into tune.

But they stood back as McCain reached the front and looked down on the crowd.

“I want to thank you all for coming,” he began, his voice booming out. “I’ll be brief. It will turn midnight in exactly twenty minutes, and that’s when the party really begins. For those of you who stay the course, we’ll be serving haggis, neeps, and tatties, then a traditional Scottish breakfast to see you off. And the champagne will be flowing all night.”

A few people cheered. The invitation had made it clear that everyone was welcome until sunrise.

“We’re here to enjoy ourselves,” he went on. “But at the same time, we can’t forget the many terrible things that are happening around the world and the many millions of people who need our help. I want you to know that tickets sold for tonight’s party, along with raffle tickets, our silent auction, and private donations, have raised a fantastic \$875,000 for First Aid.”

There was another burst of applause. Hearing it, Alex felt ashamed of himself. Whatever mistakes he had made in the past, McCain had more than redeemed himself. The whole evening was about helping other people, and in his own small way Alex had inadvertently spoiled it.

McCain held up a hand. “I have no idea how that money will be spent, but thank God it’s there.” He stressed the word *God* as if the two of them were personal friends. “This year, we had those terrible floods in Malaysia, the volcano eruption in Guatemala, and most recently, the incident at the Jowada power station in India, which could have been much, much worse. We were there first. Your money went straight to the people who needed it. Charity is the bond of perfectness, as it says in the book of Colossians. And the next time disaster strikes, wherever in the world it happens, we will be ready.”

Edward Pleasure had retrieved his coat and slipped it on. One of the waiters had opened the door to reveal a maelstrom of snow against an unforgiving night. It was time to go. Alex took one last look back, and it seemed to him that at that moment, standing on his own in the middle of the gallery, Desmond McCain stared straight at him, locking him into a final eye contact that ignored the six hundred people between them.

“Alex?” Sabina called out to him.

And then they were gone, out of the warmth of the castle, hurrying toward the car that Edward Pleasure was already unlocking, using the remote control on his key ring. The back lights blinked a welcome orange in the darkness. It had been snowing all evening. There was a carpet a couple of inches thick on the ground and on top of all the cars. If it continued much longer, Sabina might get her skiing break after all.

They threw themselves into the Nissan X-Trail, slamming the doors behind them and shaking loose some of the snow that had piled onto the car’s roof. Once again, Alex was glad that they had an off-road vehicle. They would need it tonight.

“What a night!” Edward Pleasure muttered, echoing Alex’s thoughts. He turned the key in the ignition and the engine began to throb reassuringly. He found the heating and turned it up as far as it would go.

Alex was next to him. Sabina was once again in the back. “I’m afraid we’re actually going to have New Year on the road,” he said. “It’ll take us at least an hour to get home.”

“I don’t mind.” Sabina was already untangling the wires of her iPod. “That place gave me the creeps.”

“I thought you liked parties.”

“Yes, Dad. But not when I’m the youngest person there by about two hundred years.”

They set off, the tires crunching on the newly laid snow. The weather had briefly cleared—which was just as well. Edward Pleasure would need all the visibility he could get to negotiate his way down the series of hairpin bends that led to the main road beside the loch. Alex took one last look at the great bulk of Kilmore Castle. He could see the firelight glowing behind the windows of the banqueting hall and could imagine McCain’s speech ending, the balloons cascading, the kissing and the singing and then more drinking and dancing into the morning. He was glad they’d left early. He’d had a great time in Scotland, but, like Sabina, he’d felt slightly uncomfortable at the party. He loosened his bow tie, then pulled it off. He’d have preferred to have spent the evening at home.

The accident was so sudden, so unexpected, that none of them even realized it had happened until it was almost over. For Alex, it was as if the journey down the hillside had been broken into a series of

still pictures. There was Edward Pleasure changing gear as the car picked up speed. How fast were they going? No more than twenty-five miles per hour. Sabina said something and he half turned around to answer her. The headlights were shooting out, two separate columns, distinct from each other.

And then there was a cracking sound. It seemed to come from a long way away, but that wasn't possible. It had to be something in the engine. The car shuddered and lurched crazily to one side.

Sabina cried out. There was nothing anyone could do. It was as if a giant hand had seized the back of the car and swung it around like a toy. Alex felt the tires slide helplessly across the road. Edward wrenched the steering wheel the other way, but it was useless. They were spinning out of control with the night sky rushing toward them. And then came the moment when the tires left the icy surface altogether, and with a surge of terror Alex knew that they had come off the edge of the rock face, that they were in the air with the black, frozen waters of Loch Arkaig far below.

For half a second the car hung in the air.

Then it pitched forward and plunged down.

Chapter 5: DEATH AND CHAMPAGNE

IT WAS LIKE DRIVING deliberately into a black wall. They couldn't stop. There was nothing they could do. The last thing Alex saw was Edward Pleasure clutching the steering wheel as if he had been electrified, his arms rigid, his eyes staring. Outside, the world had turned upside down. The headlights were bouncing off the surface of the loch, which hurtled toward them, filling the front window.

They hit the water. The actual impact was brutal, whipping them forward and backward at the same time. Alex realized that there must have been a thin coating of ice stretching across the lake—he heard it and felt it splinter. It was like smashing through a mirror into another dimension. The car didn't float, even for a second. Carried on by its own velocity, it plunged into the darkness, huge tentacles of water reaching out and drawing it in. The real world of Scotland and castles and New Year was wiped out as if it had never existed, to be replaced by ... nothing. All the lights in the car had gone out. It was as if steel shutters had fallen on the other side of the windows. Alex would never have believed that darkness could be so total.

Something was pressing against him, smothering him. For a moment he panicked, punching out with his fists, trying to get whatever it was off him. He couldn't breathe. What was this huge thing pushing him back into his seat? Where had it come from? He forced himself to think straight, to fight against the sense of blind terror.

The air bag. That was all. It must have been activated at the moment of impact.

Air. He was going to need it. They were still sinking beneath the surface, getting deeper and deeper. He couldn't see anything, but he could feel the pressure in his ears. There was no letup. It was getting worse and worse. How deep was the loch? Some of these Scottish lakes continued down for hundreds of feet. They would keep going until they reached the bottom, and that was where they would die. What had seconds before been a \$35,000 luxury car had become a steel coffin.

There was a soft thud and a shudder as the tires came into contact with mud. Alex was aware of a ton of blackness weighing down on him. They weren't moving anymore. That was something to be grateful for. But how far down had they gone? More to the point, how long did they have? The car wouldn't be able to keep the water out for more than a few minutes. It was even now splashing down onto his feet, presumably coming through the air vents on either side of the satellite navigation system. The water was freezing cold, numbing the flesh at first touch. Already it was over his ankles. It was as if his legs were being taken away from him, one inch at a time.

“Dad?” It was Sabina's voice, coming from the backseat. She sounded a mile away.

“Are you okay, Sabina?” Alex asked.

“Yes. I think so. What about Dad?”

Edward Pleasure hadn't spoken since they had left the road. Alex reached out over the air bag and felt the worst. The journalist was resting against the steering wheel ... unconscious, injured, perhaps even

dead. It was impossible to say. Alex couldn't see anything. He drew his hand back and held it in front of his own face, so close that it was brushing against his nose. He couldn't see it. It was impossible to breathe normally. His heart was racing, trapped inside him, just as he was trapped in this car. He couldn't deny it. He was terrified.

He swallowed hard and somehow managed to speak. "Your dad's unconscious," he said.

"What happened?" He could hear the tears in Sabina's voice. Like him, she was struggling for control.

"I don't know."

"What do we do?"

It should have been silent here at the bottom of Loch Arkaig, yet Alex was aware of noise all around him. The engine was ticking and clanking as the engine cooled. There were strange, ghostlike echoes coming from the lake itself. The Nissan was groaning as it fought against the pressure outside. And—most terrible of all—a steady stream of water continued to splash into the cabin.

Alex felt the water rise over his knees, a blanket of ice. He was sure that it had only been at ankle level a few seconds ago, but time didn't exist down here. Seconds were hours and a whole life could be over in a minute.

There was the sound of fumbling in the back, then Sabina spoke again. "Alex ... the door's locked."

"Don't even try to open it!"

Different thoughts were spinning uselessly through his mind. The Nissan might have a self-locking system. If the doors had locked themselves electronically, it would be impossible to get out. But there was no point in getting out anyway. Inside or outside they would die.

"What are we going to do?"

Alex was still blind. He reached up, hitting his hand on the ceiling. Where was the light switch over the mirror? He found it and turned it on. Nothing. Of course, the car's electrical circuits would have flooded. But then he remembered. Edward Pleasure had consulted a map just after they'd left Hawk's Lodge ... and he'd used a flashlight. Where had he put it?

He pushed the air bag out of the way and reached for the glove compartment. Somehow he managed to get it open, and more water poured out. God! They couldn't have more than a few minutes left. The water had already risen over the edge of his seat, rushing between his legs. It was unbelievably cold.

The whole lower part of his body no longer belonged to him.

But he had found what he was looking for. A heavy rubber cylinder. He flicked it on and to his utter relief it worked. The beam leapt out of his hand.

Alex had experienced more than enough in the past year, but he would never forget what he saw right then. It was the perfect nightmare.

The car was already half filled with water, which looked as black and as thick as oil. More of it was

pouring out of the ventilation ducts, coming in two steady streams. Outside the windows there was nothing. The glass didn't even look like glass. They could have been buried alive rather than deep under the surface of Loch Arkaig ... it would have made no difference. The two air bags took up most of the space in the front of the car. Edward Pleasure was slumped against his, a great gash on the side of his head. Alex undid his seat belt and twisted around. Sabina was looking more frightened than he had ever seen her. She had drawn up her legs as if she were cowering away from the water, but it had reached her anyway. It completely covered the backseat. The bottom of her silver dress was soaked.

She was shivering with cold and fear.

They were in a tomb. And they were alone. Nobody would have seen them leave the road. Nobody would ever find them. It would simply seem that they had vanished into thin air.

“Alex ...” Sabina was staring at the flashlight as if it could somehow save her life. “What happened?”

“I don't know. The car lost control.”

“Is Dad ... ?”

“He's okay. He's still breathing.” The light flickered and for a brief second the darkness rushed in. It couldn't go out now! Alex tightened his grip as if he could somehow will the batteries to keep working.

“We're going to have to open the window, Sabina.”

“Why?”

“It's the reason the doors won't open. We have to make the pressure inside the car the same as the pressure outside.”

“But then we'll drown.”

“No.” Alex shook his head. “We didn't sink that far. I don't think we can be more than sixty feet down.”

“Sixty feet is a long way, Alex.”

Alex drew a breath. He knew that there couldn't be too many more breaths in this cramped compartment available to him. The water was rising all the time, the air space beneath the ceiling becoming narrower and narrower. But once the water reached the level of the air vents, it would stop.

They would be sitting in a bubble of air that would quickly diminish as they breathed out carbon dioxide. Sabina had been wrong. They wouldn't drown. They would suffocate.

“We have to get out of the car and swim for the surface,” he said. “It's the only way.”

“What about Dad?”

“Don't worry. I'll look after him.”

“But how do we open the window?”

All the windows in the Nissan were electrically operated, and even if the battery still had power, it wouldn't have been enough to move them. The pressure outside was too great. A manual handle would have been equally useless. They had to break the glass. Alex thought about leaning back and kicking out, using the heel of his shoe. But he knew it wouldn't work. He couldn't get the right angle, and anyway, the glass was reinforced. He'd never have the strength.

He needed a hammer or an ax. Something metallic. A fire extinguisher? There wasn't one. Golf clubs?

Edward Pleasure had brought golf clubs with him, but they weren't in the car. He'd left them back at Hawk's Lodge.

Then Alex remembered.

"Sabina, where's your dad's walking stick?"

"It's here."

"Pass it to me." He couldn't keep the panic out of his voice. He could feel the seconds ticking away.

Sabina passed it across and Alex quickly examined it in the tentative light. The handle was metal and shaped like a duck's head. He could use it like a hammer ... except it was too long. He didn't have enough room to swing it. It had to be shorter. How?

"Take this." He handed the flashlight to Sabina. "Shine it on me."

"What are you doing?"

He didn't answer her. He took the walking stick and fed it through the steering wheel, slanting diagonally across the dashboard so that the tip was in the far corner. The bulk of the walking stick was now in front of him. Using all his strength and his own body weight, he wrenched forward, pushing the stick in front of him. There was a creak of straining wood, but the stick held.

The water was rising over his chest. He could feel its grip, as cold as death. He tried again and this time he was successful. The walking stick snapped in half.

There was no time to lose. He let the bottom half drop and took the splintered end in his hand. He now had something like a hammer, about a foot long.

"I'm going to break the window," he shouted. "Take a deep breath. As soon as the water's over your head, you'll be able to open the door."

Sabina nodded. She was either too cold or too frightened to speak.

Alex clutched the walking stick. Then, at the last minute, he remembered something he had learned from his days scuba diving with his uncle. "Don't hold your breath!" he exclaimed. It was one of the most common reasons for diving accidents. If he and Sabina held their breath as they rose through the different pressure levels, they would end up puncturing their lungs. "Swim as fast as you can," he said.

"But remember to hum as you go."

"What do you want me to hum, Alex? 'Auld Lang Syne'?"

Alex almost smiled. Only Sabina could still make jokes at a time like this. Perhaps that was why the two of them were so close. “Hum anything, Sabina,” he said. “As long as you’re humming, your lungs will be open.”

He unfastened Edward’s seat belt and checked that the driver’s door was unlocked. The car was filling more slowly now, but there couldn’t be much more oxygen left. He tightened his grip on the broken walking stick, then swung it with all his strength, aiming for his own passenger window, as high up as possible. The duck’s-beak handle slammed into the glass.

Sabina had aimed the flashlight toward him, and he saw a series of spidery cracks in the glass. Water oozed in, but the window held. Was it his imagination or was it already getting more difficult to breathe? He had seconds left. He swung the makeshift hammer again, then once more.

On the third strike, the window shattered, and Alex was almost torn out of his seat by the torrent of water that came rushing in, filling up the available space. The flashlight went out and the blackness returned so suddenly that he wondered if the force of the water might have knocked him out. But he was still conscious. Still thinking. Had Sabina managed to open her door? He couldn’t worry about her.

There was nothing more he could do. He had to get himself out. And Edward Pleasure too.

Fumbling, blind, he searched for the door handle. He had underestimated just how cold the rush of water would be. There were iron bands around his chest, crushing him, trying to empty his lungs. He squeezed the handle and felt the door open. At once he lurched sideways, fighting his way out of the car.

But he didn’t dare go too far. Everything was black. If he lost contact with the car, he would never find it again, and Edward Pleasure would drown. With the icy water swirling around his face, he hooked a hand underneath the door frame and felt his way over the roof and down the other side. Where was the door handle? He was already beginning to strain for air. He should have opened it from the inside. That might have saved a few precious seconds.

His hand smashed into the side mirror, but it didn’t matter because he couldn’t feel anything. Somehow he managed to curl his fingers around the handle and pull. The door opened. Alex’s own natural buoyancy was dragging him up, but he kicked out, forcing himself to stay down. He reached inside and put his arms around Edward Pleasure, yet he couldn’t get him out. He seemed to be stuck, jammed against the steering wheel.

With his own air running out and the surface at least sixty feet away, Alex thought the unthinkable. It was like some devil voice whispering in his ear. *Leave him. Look after yourself. If you stay down here any longer, both of you will die.*

It was the air bag pinning him in place. That was the problem. Alex still had the walking stick. At the last moment, almost instinctually, he had slipped it through his belt, taking it with him. Now he drew it out and, holding it this time by the handle, jabbed the splintered end into the nylon skin. He felt it puncture and there was a rush of bubbles against his fist. He was briefly tempted to breathe them in—but somehow he remembered that there would be nitrogen rather than oxygen inside the bag and it wouldn’t do him any good. The bag crumpled. Alex pulled again. Edward Pleasure came free.

They were out of the car—but which way was up? Alex couldn't even see the bubbles escaping from his lips. Nor could he feel them. The intensity of the cold had punched right through him and his entire body was numb. He was still gripping Edward Pleasure and he kicked out with his legs, hoping that gravity, buoyancy, whatever would take him in the right direction.

The journalist was dragging him down. He was a dead weight in Alex's arms, and once again that voice was in his ear. *Let him go. Forget him. Save yourself.* But he just gripped all the tighter, kicked and kicked again.

Alex was following his own advice and humming—not a tune, more a soft moan of despair. Suppose he was wrong? The Nissan could have plunged a hundred feet or even more. He looked up but saw no light, no sign of the surface.

He kicked.

It didn't feel as if he was making any progress. And what about Edward? How could Alex be sure he was still alive?

His chest was beginning to ache. His lungs were screaming for air and Alex knew that he wouldn't be able to resist them much longer. It couldn't have taken him more than a minute to clamber across the car. Another minute to get Edward out. Perhaps another minute since then. Surely he could hold his breath longer than that!

But not in this cold. The icy chill of Loch Arkaig had weakened him. It was all over. His humming faltered and stopped. There was no more air to come out. With a sob of pure despair Alex opened his mouth ...

... And breathed air. He didn't even know how or when he had reached the surface. He hadn't felt his shoulders break through. Somehow he was just there. As his vision cleared, he saw the blurred outline of the moon, lost behind clouds, and a scatter of still-falling snow. He had to struggle to keep Edward Pleasure's head above water, and he wondered, with a sense of dread, if the rescue had all been in vain.

He wasn't sure that Sabina's father was still breathing. He looked horribly like a corpse.

And where was Sabina? Alex tried to call her name, but he was too frozen ... his chest, his vocal cords. He jerked around in the water. There was Kilmore Castle, high above him. The shore was about sixty feet away. He was alone. She hadn't made it.

“Aaah ...”

No. He was wrong. There was a splashing sound, the black surface of the lake parted, and suddenly Sabina was next to him with light rippling around her. Her face was white. Her long hair had come loose and was hanging into the water. She had tried to call his name, but it was too much for her. The two of them stared at each other, saying more with their eyes than they could ever have managed with words. Then Sabina reached out and took hold of her father, sharing the weight. The two of them began an awkward, stumbling swim to dry land.

And even as they went, Alex knew that their ordeal wasn't over yet. They hadn't drowned, but they could still die of cold. Their body temperatures must be dangerously low. Once they were on the

shore, they would have to find help—and quickly, before their entire systems shut down. But how could they do it? Kilmore Castle was too high up, too far away. None of the guests would be leaving yet. And Edward Pleasure needed immediate help ... unless it was already too late.

There was a loud bang and for a horrible moment Alex thought that someone was shooting at them, but a second later the sky exploded with a blaze of white and silver, and he realized McCain had just launched his first fireworks. So this was the New Year ... and what a way to begin it, with this hideous midnight swim. All around him, the water shimmered with a brilliant array of colors as the display continued overhead. He could imagine the guests, sipping their champagne, wrapped up in their coats and scarves, as they watched from the battlements with the usual ooohs and aaahs as each five-hundred-dollar missile was outdone by the next. What would they think if they could see what was happening below? Death and champagne. It seemed incredible that the two could be so close, existing side by side.

It took them five minutes to reach the water's edge, and climbing onto the beach was a horrible, brutal experience. The beach was covered in shingle, slate gray and jagged. No feeling had yet returned to Alex's arms and legs, but if it had, he would have known only pain. He was filthy, covered in some oily film. Water was still streaming down his face. It was in his eyes and mouth. He must look barely human.

But his only thoughts were for Edward Pleasure. Helped by Sabina, he turned the journalist onto his back, then knelt beside him. The weeks he had spent in the Brecon Beacons being trained by the Special Operations Division of MI6 hadn't included lifesaving. Fortunately, he'd learned that at school.

There was a hiss and a scream, and for a second the sky blazed red, illuminating Edward's face. His eyes were still closed. Alex checked that his mouth wasn't blocked. He found his heart, placed both fists on top of it, and pushed hard.

He did it again, then continuously. Sabina was shaking violently. She might have been sobbing, but she made no sound. She had no strength left. She could only watch in growing despair as Alex kept up the massage. Edward Pleasure lay flat out, still. But suddenly, on the tenth or eleventh attempt, he suddenly coughed and water gushed out of his mouth. Sabina grabbed hold of his arm. He opened his eyes. Alex let out a deep breath. He'd been about to try mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and despite everything, a little part of him was relieved that it wasn't going to be needed.

Silver sparks crackled and exploded, hundreds of them, spread out across the darkness, then rained slowly down onto the loch.

We've got to get help. Alex tried to speak, but he was so cold, he couldn't make himself understood and the words came out as no more than single letters. "W-w-w ... v-v-v ... g-g-g ..." His whole body was out of control. His teeth were chattering. The muscles in his neck and shoulders seemed to be locked rigid. He could see the snow settling on Sabina's and her father's hair. He had never been so cold. He hadn't thought it was possible for the human body to continue functioning at this temperature.

A few more minutes out here and the three of them would freeze solid.

But the greatest miracle of the night was still to come. Alex heard the sound of footsteps on the shingle and turned around. There was a man hurrying toward them, carrying a blanket. He had appeared as if by magic. In fact, it seemed so unlikely that he was there at all that Alex wondered if he was hallucinating. It was impossible to make out the man's features in the shifting colors of the night, but vaguely Alex registered the fact that he wasn't dressed in black tie. He wasn't a guest from the party.

The man reached them. "I saw what happened!" he exclaimed. "I thought you must be dead. Are you all right? Can you move?"

"Our car ..." Alex pointed out at the loch. For a moment, the water blazed emerald green. A great circle of fire hung in the sky, then blinked out.

"I know. I saw. We have to get you, quickly, into the warm." The man draped the blanket over Sabina, and as he leaned forward another firework exploded, the glare revealing the side of his face. Alex saw that he was either Indian or Pakistani, a young man, in his very early twenties. As Sabina clutched the blanket and drew it around her shoulders, the man peeled off his coat and gave it to Alex. "Put this on,"

he instructed. "Do you think you can walk? My van is just up on the road. It's only five minutes from here. Once you're inside, you'll be okay."

Edward Pleasure was recovering his strength. He dragged himself up onto one elbow and broke into another fit of coughing. "What happened?" he asked. His voice was little more than a whisper.

"Not now, sir. Not now. We have to go."

The fireworks display had come to an end. In the far distance, Alex heard clapping and the blare of plastic noisemakers and paper horns. Slowly, the three of them staggered to their feet. Sabina and Alex had to support Edward Pleasure, and all three of them needed the help of the man who had come out of nowhere. Somehow he managed to guide them across the beach with the snow whirling around them as if unwilling to let them go.

A track led down from the main road and, on it, a white van sat with its headlights on and taillights blinking. The sight of it lent them new strength. They came off the shingle and threw themselves into the back.

"Don't worry!" Without his jacket, the man was shivering himself. He paused beside the doors. "I'll take you to a hospital. You'll be all right." He closed the doors, locking them in.

They were lying on the bare metal, a puddle of water surrounding them. Sabina was almost hidden in her blanket. Edward Pleasure was barely conscious. Alex heard the driver get into the front, and a few seconds later, they moved off. At the same time, he realized that his senses were returning. The man had turned the heat up to full and Alex could actually feel the warm breeze against his skin.

It took them an hour to reach an Inverness hospital, and Liz Pleasure arrived two hours after that. By then, all three of them had been treated for hypothermia and shock and were tucked up in bed with hot water bottles and soup, being looked after by nurses who had agreed to work through New Year's Eve and who, Alex decided, really were true angels. The man who had rescued them had left without

even giving his name. He had told them he was a supplier—on his way to Kilmore Castle. But what had he been supplying so late into the night? Alex didn't think it right to ask him, but even now it struck him that something didn't quite add up. After all, the back of the van had been empty.

They were released the next morning, Edward Pleasure blaming himself for the car accident, all of them too shaken to discuss it. Between them, they had decided to cut the vacation short. The Highlands and lochs of Scotland held no attraction after what had happened. They needed the reassurance of the city.

Waiting for the plane that would take them back to London, Alex did wonder if he should tell them what he knew, what he had seen one second before the car swerved and left the road. But in the end he decided against it. He still wasn't one hundred percent sure. He wanted to believe that he was wrong.

Just before the car had lost control, he had heard a distant cracking sound. And at the same moment, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he'd seen a tiny flash of light in the darkness, behind them and high up above. He hadn't imagined it. It had been there. And he understood exactly what it meant.

A marksman positioned in the battlements of Kilmore Castle.

Edward Pleasure hadn't skidded on the ice. One of his tires had been blown out and it had been done quite deliberately by someone who wanted to force them off the road. Anyone else would have thought they were imagining it, but Alex knew better. He had been a target too many times before. Someone had just tried to kill them.

But who?

Desmond McCain? Because he had lost at cards? No—that was insane. There had to be someone else.

An old enemy perhaps. Alex had plenty enough of them. Or maybe it had nothing to do with him.

Edward Pleasure could have been the target. Journalists, too, had plenty of people who wanted to settle scores.

He said nothing. The last time he had been with the family, in the south of France, they had been attacked. How could he possibly tell them that it had happened a second time? Sabina would never want to see him again. It was much better to persuade himself that he was wrong, that he was tired, that he had an overactive imagination. Anyway, in a few minutes they would be in the air, flying south, leaving it all behind them.

And yet, secretly, he knew that he was lying to himself. As his flight was called and he picked up his carry-on luggage, Alex gritted his teeth. Trouble never seemed to leave him alone. Well, let it follow him to London. He'd just have to be ready for it when it showed up again.

Chapter 6: NINE FRAMES PER SECOND

ALEX WAS GLAD TO BE HOME.

First of all, Jack was there, waiting for him, surrounded by presents she'd brought back from America.

Alex sometimes wondered what people would make of the two of them, living together the way they did. With her baggy clothes, her wild red hair, and her constant smile, Jack was more like a big sister than a housekeeper. And although she was actually his legal guardian, she never nagged or lectured him. They were really just friends and Alex knew that he couldn't have gotten through the last twelve months without her. She knew what he was doing. She had tried to talk him out of it. But she had never stood in his way.

She'd bought him new jeans, two shirts, a Barack Obama baseball cap, and a pair of fake police sunglasses. And over their first dinner together, he had told her what had happened at Loch Arkaig ... but with no mention of any sniper.

"I just don't believe it, Alex!" Jack exclaimed. "You go off for a nice New Year's Eve party and you end up sixty feet under a frozen loch. Only you could manage that."

"It wasn't my fault," Alex protested. "I wasn't driving."

"You know what I mean. How's Edward? How's Sabina?"

"They're okay. They were shaken up. We all were."

"I'm not surprised. Do you know how it happened?"

Alex hesitated. The one thing he wasn't going to do was lie to Jack. "Nobody's quite sure. They haven't gotten the car out yet. It's possible they never will. But Edward thinks one of the tires blew out.

He felt something just before he lost control."

"And what about the man who helped you?"

"He didn't hang around. He didn't even wait to be thanked."

Alex wouldn't have mentioned the accident at all, but he knew it would come out the following weekend when he and Jack went to Heathrow Airport to say good-bye to Sabina and her parents, who were finally returning home.

It was an uneasy last meeting, the five of them standing together, hemmed in by the crowds and suitcases and bright lights of Terminal Three.

"We'll see you again in the spring," Edward Pleasure said, reaching out and shaking Alex's hand.

"We've got a spare room and we can head up the coast. I'm sure you'd enjoy trekking in Yosemite, or we could stay on Big Sur."

Sabina's mother gave him a hug. "I know what you did," she said quietly. "Sabina told me. Edward would still be in that car if it hadn't been for you." Alex said nothing. For some reason, it always embarrassed him, being thanked. "I hope you'll come and see us. And you too, Jack. Maybe you should come over together."

And then it was Sabina's turn. She and Alex moved a little to one side.

"Bye, Alex."

"Bye, Sabina."

"I thought you were brilliant in the car. When I started to swim up to the surface, I was certain I was going to die. But I knew my dad would be all right because you'd promised you'd look after him."

"It seems that every time your family meets me, something bad happens," Alex said. It was true. In Cornwall, the south of France, and now in Scotland ... sudden violence had never been far away.

"Will you come to San Francisco?"

"There'd probably be an earthquake or something."

"I don't mind. I still want to see you."

Sabina glanced at her parents. They were standing with their backs to her, talking to Jack. She quickly leaned forward and kissed Alex on the cheek. Then, suddenly, the three of them were picking up their carry-on luggage and making their way through to the security checks and passport control. Sabina looked back one last time and waved. Then they were gone.

The next day, Alex went back to school and the Christmas holidays were forgotten in a whirl of seating assignments, schedules, textbooks, new teachers, and old friends. Brookland was a sprawling, mixed comprehensive school half a mile north of Chelsea. It had been built only about ten years ago and it prided itself on its modern architecture, with double-height windows and bright primary colors. At the same time, though, it still had an old-fashioned, friendly feel. Everyone wore uniforms ... sober shades of blue and gray. The school even had a Latin motto: *Pergo et Perago*, which sounded like the story of two Italian cannibals but which actually meant "I try and I achieve."

"No running in the corridor, Alex." Miss Bedfordshire, the school secretary, greeted Alex with one of her favorite phrases, even though Alex had only been walking quickly. She had stepped out of one of the classrooms, blocking his path.

"Hi, Miss Bedfordshire."

"It's good to see you. Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Yes, thanks."

"And do you plan to stay with us for the whole term? It would certainly make a nice change."

Alex had missed almost half the school year, and Miss Bedfordshire had always had her doubts about the series of strange illnesses that had been listed on his doctor's notes. "I hope so," he said.

“Maybe you should eat more fruit. You know ... an apple a day.”

“I’ll give it a try.”

Alex hurried on his way, aware that the secretary was watching him as he went. Sometimes he wondered how much she really knew.

And then there were twenty minutes of catching up with the usual crowd. Tom Harris was late as usual and looked incredibly scruffy in a new uniform, which was one size too big for him. His parents had recently gotten separated, and he had spent the Christmas holidays with his older brother in Naples.

Alex had gotten to know them both when he’d come up against Scorpia for the first time—and Tom was the only boy in the school who was aware of his involvement with MI6. There were a couple of girls with him now, and together they all piled into the sports hall for Year Group Assembly.

This began, as usual, with a hymn, which the principal, Mr. Bray, insisted on—even though every other school in the area had dropped it. There were three hundred of them packed into the hall, and they were horribly out of tune. The last chords faded away and everyone sat down to listen to an uplifting speech, which, as usual, went on too long. This term, it was all about respect. “Respect for others; respect for yourself; above all, respect for the community.” Alex noticed that Tom was listening intently, with one hand resting against the side of his head. Only he could see the white wires of an iPod trailing back down the other boy’s sleeve and could hear the faint *tish-ta-ta-tish* coming from his ear.

Then it was on to school business. Mr. Bray introduced a new class tutor and mentioned a couple of teachers who were leaving. “One last thing,” he announced. “I’m very happy to tell you that the science wing is finally opening again after the mysterious fire that did so much damage back in May.” Alex shifted uncomfortably. He had been at the very center of the fire and knew exactly what had caused it.

He was glad that Tom wasn’t listening. Watching Alex squirm, and knowing as much about him as he did, his friend might have been able to put two and two together. “I hope you’ll enjoy the new facilities.

I wish you all a hardworking and successful term.”

The assembly finished and the lessons began. For Alex that meant history followed by math and then social studies, a cheerful assortment for the first morning of the first day of classes. After lunch, the first lesson of the afternoon was biology with John Gilbert, a young teacher who had only arrived the summer before. He was curly haired with glasses and specialized in brightly colored ties. He hadn’t been teaching long enough to lose his enthusiasm, and it had been he who had given the class the project on genetic engineering that Alex had described in Scotland.

“I hope you’ve all begun to think about this very serious subject,” he began. “I’m going to want to see your written work completed by midterm. And I’ve got some good news.” He picked up a letter and showed it to the class. “At the end of last term, I wrote to the Greenfields Bio Center in Wiltshire. I’m sure you know who they are ... they’re always in the news. Greenfields is a private organization, one of the world leaders in plant science and microbiology. They’ve been doing more than anyone else to

develop new techniques in genetic engineering, and they've got a huge facility on the edge of Salisbury Plain. I asked if we could visit, look at their work, and maybe talk to some of their professors—and rather to my surprise, they've agreed. To be honest with you, I didn't think they'd allow school visits because so much of their work is secretive. But we'll be heading down there in a couple of weeks. I'll need to get permission from your parents, and I'll hand out forms at the end of the period. Don't forget to get them signed!"

He put the letter down and went over to the blackboard.

"Now, I want to find out how you're coming along with your projects. But first of all, I asked you to come up with some of the good things and the bad things about GM crops. Can anyone give me an example of how this science has helped society?"

GM crops.

Alex couldn't help himself. He remembered the moment he had told Edward Pleasure about his work just as Desmond McCain had come down the stairs, and suddenly he was back at Kilmore Castle, half an hour before New Year's. McCain had appeared alarmed about something. But what could it have been, and could it really have led to the gunshot and the near death in Loch Arkaig?

There had been no gunshot. Alex tried to force the idea out of his head. The car had blown a tire, that was all. And yet, he still remembered McCain, the gleaming, bald head, the silver cross, the strange line where the two halves of his head failed to meet.

No. This was crazy. McCain ran a charity. He had made a mistake in his life, but he had paid for it. He wasn't a killer.

"Rider?"

Alex heard his name, realized it had been called out twice, and forced himself to focus back on the class. Just as he had feared, Mr. Gilbert had asked him something and he hadn't even heard the question. He'd been miles away.

"I'm sorry, sir?" he said.

Mr. Gilbert sighed. "You don't turn up to school very often, Rider. But it would be nice if you actually listened when you did. Hale?"

James Hale was another of Alex's friends, a neat-looking boy with brown hair and blue eyes, sitting at the next desk. He glanced apologetically at Alex and then answered. "GM science can make crops grow extra vitamins," he said. "And there was a special sort of rice that was changed so that it could grow underwater for a few days without dying."

"Very good. It was called golden rice, and obviously it was very useful in countries with too much rainfall. Anyone else?"

Alex made sure he concentrated until the end of the lesson. The first day of the term was far too early to get into trouble. Somehow he made it to 3:45 without further incident, and then he was part of the crowd, pouring out of the school gates with his backpack over his shoulder. For once, he hadn't brought his bike with him. Alex owned a Condor Junior Roadracer that had been built for him as a

twelfth birthday present. But he'd noticed recently that it wasn't giving him a comfortable ride. The truth was that he was growing out of it, and the seat wouldn't adjust any more. He would be sorry to see it go. It belonged to his old life, before his uncle had died, and there was precious little of that left.

Perhaps it was thinking of his uncle that drove Alex to take a shortcut across Brompton Cemetery. This was where Ian Rider had been buried after the so-called car accident, the one that began with gunshots being fired into his uncle's car. It was at the funeral that Alex had first begun to learn the truth about his uncle, that he had never actually worked in a bank. He had instead lived and died as a spy. Alex often walked past the gravestone, but today, acting on impulse, he left the main path and went over to it. He looked at the name, carved in a square slab of gray marble, with the dates below it and a single line: A GOOD MAN TAKEN BEFORE HIS TIME. Well, that was one way to put it. Somebody had left flowers, quite recently. Roses. The petals were dead and withered, but there was still a little color in the leaves. Who had been here? Jack? And if it was her, why hadn't she mentioned it to him?

Alex bent down and swept the plants to one side. He thought about the man who had looked after him all his life but who had been gone now for almost a year. He could still picture Ian Rider—halfway up a mountain, on a diving boat in full scuba gear, or racing on Jet Skis over the South China Sea. He had taken Alex all over the world, always challenging him, pushing him to the limit. Adventure vacations, he had called them. And how could Alex have known that all that time he was being trained, prepared to follow in his uncle's footsteps?

Footsteps that had brought him here.

“Alex Rider?”

They must have crept up behind him while he was crouching beside the grave, and even without looking up, Alex knew that somehow he was in trouble. There was something about the voice—soft and threatening, with a slight foreign inflection.

Slowly, Alex turned and looked up. Sure enough, there were three men standing at the foot of the grave, all of them Chinese, dressed in jeans and loose-fitting jackets. They were completely relaxed, as if they had strolled into the cemetery and come upon him by chance. But Alex knew that wasn't the case. They might have followed him from school. They might have known that he sometimes took this shortcut and waited for him. But there was nothing chance about this meeting. They were here for one single purpose.

“I'm sorry,” Alex said. “My name is James Hale. You've got the wrong person.”

Even as he spoke, he was glancing left and right. There was nobody else around. No passing vicar, no other kids from Brookland on their way home. Apart from his backpack, Alex had nothing with him.

He knew he wasn't going to find any weapons in a cemetery, but there was always a chance that a gravedigger had been careless enough to leave behind a spade.

He was out of luck. There was an open grave, waiting for its occupant, about a dozen headstones away.

But there was no sign of any tools. What else? A small stone angel stood above him, a monument to “a great dad, a much-missed granddad and a wonderful husband.” Why did no one ever have anything bad to say about people who had died?

The nearest man smiled unpleasantly, revealing nicotine-stained teeth. “You are Alex Rider,” he insisted. “This is the grave of your uncle.”

“You’re wrong. He used to live next door ...”

Just for a moment, the three men hesitated, wondering if, after all, they had made a mistake. But then the leader made up his mind. “You will come with us,” he said.

“Why? Where do you want to take me?”

“No more questions. Just come!”

Alex remained where he was, crouching beside the gravestone. He wondered what would happen next.

He quickly found out. The man who had spoken made a signal, and suddenly all three of them were armed. The knives had appeared in their hands like some unpleasant magic trick. Alex examined the silver blades, one in front of him, one on either side. They were notched, designed to leave the most vicious wounds. Somehow the men had gotten into position, surrounding Alex, without seeming to move. They were standing in combat stance, the weight spread evenly over their feet, each knife exactly the same distance from the ground. These were professional killers. They had done this many times before.

“What do you want?” Alex demanded, trying to keep his voice neutral. “I don’t have any money.”

“We don’t want money.” One of the other men spat into the grass. He had furious eyes, lips twisted into a permanent sneer.

“Major Winston Yu sent us to see you,” the leader said.

Winston Yu! So that was what this was about. Somehow the head of the snakehead that Alex had helped break up in Thailand had reached out from whatever hell he had been sent to. He had left instructions for revenge.

“Major Yu is dead,” Alex said.

“You killed him.”

“No. The last time I saw him, he was running away. If he’s dead, that’s the best thing that ever happened to him. But it had nothing to do with me.”

“You’re lying.”

“What difference does it make? He’s finished. The whole thing’s over. Coming after me isn’t going to bring him back.”

“You must pay for what you did.”

They were about to make their move. Alex could almost see the knives jabbing forward, striking at

his stomach and chest. They would leave him in the cemetery, bleeding to death, and the next funeral that took place here would be his. But he wasn't going to let that happen. He acted first. He was still holding the dead roses that he had been clearing from his uncle's grave. He could feel the sharp thorns digging into the palm of his hand.

Swinging his arm up, Alex threw them, scattering them across the first man's face. For just a second, the man was blinded, in pain, the thorns cutting into him. A single dead rose clutched at the skin under one of his eyes. Alex sprang up, then followed through with a powerful back kick, the ball of his foot ramming into the man's stomach. The man's eyes widened in shock and he crumpled, gasping for breath. That left just two.

They were already lunging toward him. Alex had to get out of their range, and there was only one way.

He threw himself sideways, one hand down, cartwheeling over Ian Rider's gravestone. He needed a weapon and he snatched up the only one he could see—the stone angel from the grave next to his uncle's. He hoped the much-missed granddad wouldn't mind. The angel was heavy. Alex swung it around and hurled it at one of the men. It hit him in the face, breaking his nose. Blood poured over the man's lips and he reeled away, howling.

The last of the three men swore in Chinese and launched himself toward Alex, the knife swinging in great arcs, cutting at the air. Alex fled. With his attacker getting closer all the time, he ran over six of the graves, then leapt over the open trench. But the moment he landed, he stopped and turned around.

The man had also jumped. He had been taken completely by surprise. He had expected Alex to keep running. Instead, he was in midair while Alex had both feet firmly planted on the ground. There was nothing he could do as Alex lashed out with a front jab—the *kizami-zuki* he had been taught in karate —

leaning with all his weight forward for maximum reach.

Alex's fist caught the man in the throat. The man's eyes went white and he plunged down like a stone, disappearing into the grave. He hit the mud at the bottom and lay still.

The first man was now on his knees, wheezing, barely able to breathe. The second was still bleeding.

Alex alone was unhurt. So what should he do now? Call the police on his mobile? No. The last thing he needed right now was a load of tricky questions.

He went back to Ian Rider's grave, snatched up his backpack, and walked away. But even as he went, there were questions of his own nagging at his mind. If Major Yu had given orders for him to be killed, why hadn't they just gone ahead and done it? They could have tiptoed up behind him and stabbed him.

Why had they felt the need to announce themselves? And for that matter, why had none of them been carrying a gun? Wouldn't that have made the whole thing easier?

As Alex left the cemetery, he didn't see the fourth man, fifty yards away, hiding behind one of the Victorian mausoleums. This was an Englishman or an American, with fair hair hanging down to his neck, smiling to himself as he watched Alex through the 135mm telephoto lens that was attached to the Nikon D3 digital camera he was holding. He had taken more than a hundred shots of the encounter,

clicking away at a rate of nine frames per second, but he took a few more, just for good measure. *Click.*

Alex dusting himself down. *Click.* Alex turning away. *Click.* Alex heading for the main gate.

He had it all recorded. It was perfect. The man had been chewing gum, but now he took it out of his mouth, rolled it into a ball, and pressed it against one of the gravestones. *Click.* One final shot of Alex leaving the cemetery and the whole thing was in the bag.

Chapter 7: BAD NEWS

ALEX WAS HAVING DINNER with Jack when the doorbell rang.

“Are you expecting anyone?” she asked.

“No.”

The doorbell sounded again, longer and more insistent. This time Jack put down her knife and fork and frowned. “I’ll get it,” she said. “But why do they have to come at this time of night?”

It was half past seven in the evening. Alex had come home, changed, done his homework, and had a shower. He was sitting at the kitchen table of the Chelsea home that had once belonged to Ian Rider but which he and Jack now shared. He was wearing jeans and an old sweat-shirt. His hair was still damp and his feet were bare. Jack liked to call herself a ten-minute cook because that was the maximum amount of time she spent preparing a meal. Tonight she had served a homemade fish pie, although Alex suspected she had cheated on the time.

He was feeling guilty. He hadn’t told her yet about the fight at the cemetery, partly because he was waiting for the right moment, partly because he knew what she would say. There was no way that he could keep something like that from her, but he wasn’t keen on ruining the evening.

He heard voices out in the hall—a man speaking, polite but insistent. Jack arguing. There was a pause, then Jack returned on her own. Alex could see at once that she was concerned.

“There’s someone here who wants to see you,” she said.

“Who is it?”

“He says his name is Harry Bulman.”

Alex shook his head. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“Then let me introduce myself ...”

A man had appeared at the kitchen door behind Jack, strolling into the room, looking around him at the same time. He was in his thirties, with long, blond hair falling in a tangle, broad shoulders, and a thick neck. He was handsome—but not quite as handsome as he thought. There was an arrogance about him that presented itself in every move he made, even the way he had followed Jack in. He was dressed nicely in gray slacks, a black blazer, and a white shirt open at the collar. He had a gold chain around his neck and a gold signet ring with the letters *HB* on his third finger. To Alex, it was as if he had stepped out of an advertisement for clothes ... or perhaps for toothpaste. This was a man who enjoyed being himself and wanted to sell himself to the world.

Jack spun around. “I don’t remember inviting you in.”

“Please. Don’t ask me to wait outside. If you want the truth, I’ve been waiting for this moment for quite a long time.” He looked past Jack. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you, Alex.”

Alex slid his food aside. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

“You don’t need to sit down,” Jack growled. “You’re not staying long.”

“You might change your mind when you hear what I’ve got to say.” The man sat down anyway. He was at the head of the table, opposite Alex. “My name is Harry Bulman,” he said. “I’m sorry I’ve come by so late, but I know you’re at school, Alex—at Brookland—and I wanted to catch you while you were both in.”

“What do you want?” Alex asked.

“Well, right now, I could murder a beer if there’s one going.” Nobody moved. “Okay. I’ll get to the point. I’ve come here to speak to you, Alex. As a matter of fact, although you won’t believe it, I want to help you. I hope the two of us are going to be seeing quite a bit of each other. I think we’re going to become friends.”

“I don’t need any help,” Alex said.

Bulman smiled. His teeth were as white as his shirt. “You haven’t heard what I’ve got to say.”

“Then why don’t you get on with it?” Jack cut in. “Because we were having supper and we didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Smells good.” Bulman drew a business card out of his wallet and slid it across the table. Jack came over and sat next to Alex. They both read it. There was the name—Harry Bulman—and beneath it his job description: Freelance Journalist. There was also an address in north London and a telephone number.

“You work for the press,” Jack said.

“The *Mirror*, the *Express*, the *Star* ...” Bulman nodded. “If you ask around, you’ll find I’m fairly well known.”

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked. “You said you could help me. I don’t need a journalist.”

“As a matter of fact, you do.” Bulman took out a packet of chewing gum. “Do you mind?” he asked.

“I’ve given up smoking and I find this helps.” He unwrapped a piece and curled it into his mouth. He looked around again. “This is a nice place you’ve got here.”

“Please get on with it, Mr. Bulman.”

Alex could hear that Jack was running out of patience. But the journalist had already outmaneuvered them twice. He had simply walked in here, and for the moment neither of them was asking him to leave.

“All right. Let’s cut to the chase.” Bulman rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “You might not know this, but many journalists have a specialist area. It might be food, sports, politics ...

whatever. My specialty is intelligence. I spent six years in the army—I was in the commandos—and I hung on to my old contacts when I left. I always figured they might come in handy. I was actually thinking about writing a book, but that didn’t work out, so I started touting myself around Fleet Street.

MI5, MI6, CIA ... any bits of gossip I managed to pick up, I’d string together as a story. It wasn’t

going to make me rich. But I did okay.”

Alex and Jack were listening to this in silence. Neither of them liked the way it was going.

“And then, a couple of months ago, I started to hear these strange rumors. They began with an event that took place at the Science Museum last April, when Herod Sayle was about to launch his Stormbreaker computer system. What happened to the Stormbreakers, by the way? There was going to be one in every school in the country, but suddenly they were recalled and that was that. They were never seen again.”

He waited for a response, but Alex simply met his questioning gaze with silence.

“Anyway, back to the Science Museum. It seems that someone, an agent of MI6 Special Operations, parachuted through the roof and took a shot at Sayle. No name. No pack drill. Nothing unusual about that. But then I was talking to a mate in a pub, and he told me that the bloke at the end of the parachute wasn’t a man at all. It was a boy. He swore to me that Special Operations had gone out and recruited a fourteen-year-old and that this was their latest secret weapon.

“Of course, I didn’t believe it at first. But I decided to have a nose around, so I started asking questions. And do you know what? It all turned out to be true. MI6 had taken some poor bloody kid, trained him up with the SAS in the Lake District, and sent him out on active service no less than three times. It took me a while longer to find out the name of this boy wonder. In the SAS, he was known as ‘Cub.’ But I persisted ... I’m not so bad at this job ... and in the end I got what I wanted. Alex Rider. That’s you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alex said.

“You’re making a mistake, Mr. Bulman,” Jack added. “Your story is ridiculous. Alex is still at school.”

“Alex *is* still at Brookland,” Bulman agreed. “But according to the school secretary, a very nice lady named Miss Bedfordshire, he’s been away an awful lot recently. Don’t blame her, by the way. She didn’t know I was a journalist. I pretended I was calling from the local council. But let me see ...”

Bulman took out a notebook.

“You were away for the first time last April. You were also away at the end of last year. That would have been at exactly the same time that a teenage boy dropped in on an oil rig in the Timor Sea, fighting alongside the Australian SAS. And who was that kid at Heathrow Airport when Damian Cray had a nasty accident in a jumbo jet? Now there’s a funny thing, isn’t it? An international pop singer one minute—a multimillionaire—and the next minute the papers are announcing that he’s had a heart attack. Well, I suppose I’d have a heart attack too if someone pushed me into the turbine of a plane.”

Bulman snapped the notebook shut. “Nobody’s been allowed to write anything about any of this.

National security and all the rest of it. But I’ve spoken to people who were at the Science Museum, at Heathrow, and in Australia.” He fixed his eyes on Alex. “And they’ve all described you to a T.”

There was a long silence. Jack’s fish pie had gone cold. Alex was stunned. He had always supposed

MI6 would protect him from publicity. He had never expected a journalist to turn up at his own home.

Jack was the first to speak. "You've got it all wrong," she said. "Alex took a bit of time off last term because he was sick. You can't possibly think—"

"Please don't treat me like an idiot, Miss Starbright," Bulman cut in, and suddenly there was steel in his voice. "I've done my homework. I know everything. So why don't you stop wasting my time and face up to the facts?" He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a bunch of photographs. Alex winced. He guessed what was coming even before the journalist spread them on the table. And he was right. The pictures had been taken just a few hours before in Brompton Cemetery. They showed Alex in action against the three men who had attacked him, kicking out in one frame, spinning over the gravestone in another.

"When were these taken?" Jack asked. She was obviously shaken.

"This afternoon," Alex replied. "They followed me from school and came up to me in the cemetery."

He looked accusingly at Bulman. "You set it all up."

The journalist nodded. "Believe me, Alex. They weren't going to hurt you. But I had to be one hundred percent certain. I wanted to see you in action for myself. And I have to say, you more than lived up to your reputation. In fact, I'm going to have to pay my people double what I promised them. You put two of them into the hospital! Oh ... and there's something else you should know about."

Bulman produced a miniature tape recorder and pressed a button. At once, Alex heard his own voice, a little tinny and distant, but definitely him.

"Major Yu is dead."

"You killed him."

"No. The last time I saw him, he was running away... ."

"All three of them were wired up for sound." Bulman flicked the tape off. "You knew all about the snakehead, so don't play innocent with me. By the way, I never found out how Major Yu died. I'd be interested to know how it happened."

Alex glanced at Jack. They both knew there was no point denying it anymore. "What exactly do you want?" he demanded.

"Well, we could start with that beer I was talking about."

Jack stiffened. Then she stood up, went to the fridge, and took out a can of beer. She gave it to the journalist without a glass, but he didn't seem to mind. He cracked it open and drank.

"Thank you, Jack," he said, all pretense of formality gone. "Look ... I can tell you're both a bit thrown by this, and I can understand that, but you've got to remember what I said when I first came in. I'm on your side. In fact, I want to help you."

"Help me ... how?"

"By telling your story." Bulman held a hand up before Alex could interrupt. "Wait a minute. Just hear

me out.” He had obviously rehearsed what he was about to say. “First of all, I think what’s happened to you is an outrage. It’s more than that. It’s a national scandal. In case you hadn’t noticed, the law says that you can’t join the army until you’re sixteen ... and only after you’ve taken your school exams. So the idea that MI6 can just stroll along and use a kid like you quite frankly beggars belief. Did you volunteer?”

Alex said nothing.

“It doesn’t matter. We can get to all that later. But the point is this: When this gets out, heads are going to roll. The way I see it, you’re the victim in all this, Alex. Don’t get me wrong. You’re also a hero. If even half what I’ve heard about you is true, then what you’ve done is absolutely amazing. But it should never have been allowed to happen, and I think people are going to be horrified when the story breaks.”

“The story will never break,” Jack muttered. “MI6 won’t let you write it.”

“I’m sure they’ll try to stop me. But this is the twenty-first century, Jack, and it’s not so easy anymore. You think the Americans wanted anyone to know about the torture practices carried out in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq? Or what about all the British members of Parliament who were trying to hide their crooked expenses? There are no secrets these days. If they stop me from going to the newspapers, I can put it on the Internet, and once the story’s broken, the press will come running. You’ll see. And if we keep it exclusive—if we go to the *Sunday Times* or the *Telegraph*—we’ll clean up.

“But it’s not just about the newspapers. The way I see it, there’s a book in this. It shouldn’t take more than three months to write, and it’ll sell all over the world. Tony Blair was offered six million for his memoirs, which nobody even wants to read. I reckon we could make ten times that amount. Then there’ll be syndication in the world press, exclusive interviews—Oprah Winfrey will pay a million alone—and almost certainly a bidding war for the rights to make a major Hollywood film. You’re going to be the most famous person in the world, Alex. Everyone is going to want a piece of you.”

“And who gets the money?” Jack asked. She already knew the answer.

“We’ll come to an agreement, Jack. Whatever you may think of me, I’m not greedy, and there’s going to be more than enough to go around. Fifty-fifty! Alex will tell me the full story and I’ll write it down. I’ve got all the contacts ... publishers, lawyers, that sort of thing. In a way, I’ll be Alex’s manager, and I promise you I’ll look after him. Like I said, I’m a fan. And after what he’s been through, he deserves to rake it in. From what I hear, MI6 hasn’t even paid him a regular salary. Now that’s what I call exploitation.”

“Suppose I’m not interested,” Alex said. “Suppose I don’t want the story to be told.”

Bulman drank more of his beer. The chewing gum was still in his mouth. “It’s too late for that now, Alex,” he explained. “It’s going to happen anyway. The story’s out there and someone’s going to write it, even if I don’t. If you sit back and refuse to cooperate, it’ll only make it worse. You’ll have to live with what people say about you and you won’t get a chance to set down your own side of what happened.

“But in a way, if you don’t mind my saying so, you’re lucky that you’ve got me in the driver’s seat.

You think anyone else would offer you equal partnership? In fact, most other journalists would have just gone ahead and broken the news without even coming here. I can imagine you’re probably a bit confused right now, and I’m sorry I pulled that stunt on you in the cemetery. But believe me, once you get to know me better, we’re going to be friends. I’m a professional. I know what I’m doing.”

Bulman finished his beer and crumpled the can. Alex didn’t know what to say. Too many thoughts were going through his head.

Fortunately, Jack was never at a loss for words. “Thank you for being so frank with us,” she said. “But if you don’t mind, we’d like a little time to think about what you’ve said.”

“Of course. I can understand that. You have my number. I can give you one week.” Bulman stood up.

“I reckon it’ll be quite fun, Alex. I’ll come here every evening and we’ll talk for a couple of hours.

Then I’ll write it up the next day while you’re at school. You can read it over for accuracy on weekends.” He gestured at the photographs. “You can hang on to those. I’ve got copies.”

He went over to the door, then turned around one last time.

“You’re a real hero, Alex,” he said. “I hope I made that clear from the start. There aren’t many boys your age who actually believe in their country. You’re a patriot and I respect that. I’m really privileged to have met you.” He waved a hand. “Don’t get up. I’ll show myself out.” And then he was gone.

Neither Jack nor Alex said anything until they heard the front door close. Then Jack went out to make sure the journalist had really left. Alex stayed where he was. He was in shock. He was trying to think of what it would all mean. He would become world famous. There was no doubt of that. His photograph would be in all the newspapers and magazines, and he would never be able to walk down the street again, not without being pointed out as some sort of curiosity ... a freak. He would have to leave Brookland, of course. He might even have to leave the UK. He could say good-bye to his home, to his friends, to any chance of a normal life.

He felt a black anger welling up inside him. How could he have allowed this to happen?

Jack came back into the room. “He’s gone,” she said. She sat down at the table. The photographs were still spread out in front of her. “Why didn’t you tell me about the cemetery?” she asked.

There was no accusation in her voice, but Alex knew she was upset. “I wanted to,” he said. “But it happened so soon after Scotland that I thought you’d be worried.”

“I’d be more worried if I thought you weren’t telling me when you were in trouble.”

“I’m sorry, Jack.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Jack gathered the photographs into a pile and placed them facedown. “He wasn’t quite as clever as he thought,” she said. “He didn’t know everything about you. He’d only found out about three of your missions. And he said you trained in the Lake District. He got that wrong too.”

“He knew enough,” Alex said.

“So what are we going to do?”

“We can’t let him write this story.” Alex felt a hollow in his chest. “He doesn’t care about me. He just wants to use me. He’s going to ruin everything.”

Jack reached out and took his hand. “Don’t worry, Alex. We’ll stop him.”

“How?” Alex thought for a moment, then answered his own question. “We’re going to have to go and see Mr. Blunt.”

It was the only answer. They both knew it. There were no other options.

“I don’t like you going back there.” Jack was only saying what Alex was thinking. “Every time you set foot in that door, something bad comes out of it. I was beginning to think they’d forgotten all about you. This will just remind them ...”

“I know. But who else is going to stop him, Jack? We need their help.”

“They’ve never helped you before, Alex.”

“This time it would be in their interest. They’re not going to want Harry Bulman writing about them.”

Alex pushed his plate away. He had barely eaten, but he no longer had any appetite. “I’ll go after school tomorrow.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Thanks.”

He was going back. The decision had been made. But as Alex got up and helped clear the table, he wondered if in truth he had ever really left.

Chapter 8: THE LION'S DEN

THE EVENING SEEMED TO have drawn in early on Liverpool Street. It was only half past four as Jack and Alex came out of the station, but already the streetlamps were on and the first commuters were on their way home, snatching their free newspapers without even breaking pace. There must have been a slight mist in the air, because it seemed to Alex that the offices were glowing unnaturally, the light behind the windows not quite making it to the world outside.

Punched in the chest.

Unable to breathe.

The pavement, cold and hard, rushing toward him.

This was where Alex had been shot, and he would never be able to return without experiencing it again.

The flower seller that he saw now, standing across the road, the old woman coming out of the shop ... had they been there that day? It had been five o'clock, almost the same time as now, but during the summer. There was the roof where the sniper must have lain concealed, waiting for Alex to come out.

He had sworn that he would never come back here, yet here he was. It was like one of those dreams where you keep on running but always end up in the same place. Trapped.

“Are you okay?” Jack asked. She could see what was going on in his head.

Alex pulled himself together. “It feels strange, being back.”

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“Yes. Let's get it over with.”

They stopped in front of a tall, classical building that would have been just as much at home in New York but for the Union Jack that hung limply from a pole jutting out of the sixteenth floor. A set of rotating doors invited them in, and set in the wall to one side a brass plaque read, ROYAL & GENERAL BANK PLC. LONDON.

Strangely, the bank was fully operational, with loan desks, cash machines, tellers, and clients, and Alex wondered how many people must have accounts here without knowing what the real purpose of the building was. The entire place belonged to the Special Operations Division of MI6. The bank was nothing more than a cover. And for that matter, how many men and women would come out of those doors, never to return? Alex's uncle had been one of them, dying for queen and country or whatever else motivated them. What difference did it make once you were dead?

“Alex?” Jack was watching him anxiously, and he realized that, despite what he had just said, he hadn't moved. “The lion's den,” she muttered.

“That's what it feels like.”

“Come on ...”

They went in.

The doors spun them from the cold reality of the city to the warmth and deception of a world where nothing was ever what it seemed. They were in a reception area with a row of elevators, a marble floor, half a dozen clocks—each one showing the time in a different country—and the inevitable potted plants. But there would be hidden cameras too. Their images would already be on the way to a central computer equipped with face-recognition software. And the two receptionists, both female and pretty, would know exactly who they were before they said a word.

One of them looked up as they approached. “Can I help you?”

“We have an appointment with Mrs. Jones.”

“Of course. Please take a seat.”

It was all so normal. Alex and Jack took their place on a leather sofa with a scattering of financial magazines on the table in front of them. Alex had come straight from school, so he was still in his uniform. He wondered what he must look like to passersby. A rich kid, perhaps, opening his first account.

A few minutes later, one of the elevators opened and a dark-haired woman in a black suit stepped out.

As usual, she wore very little jewelry, just a simple silver chain around her neck. This was Mrs. Jones, the deputy head of Special Operations and the second most important person in the building. Despite the impact that she’d had on his life, Alex knew very little about her. She lived in an apartment in Clerkenwell, near the old meat market. She might have been married once. She had two children, but something had happened to them and they were no longer around. And that was it. If she’d ever had a private life, she’d left it behind her when she became a spy—and the spy was all that was left.

“Good afternoon, Alex.” She didn’t exactly seem pleased to see him. Her face was completely neutral.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you, Mrs. Jones.”

“We’re ready to see you.” She turned to Jack. “I’ll bring Alex back down in about half an hour.”

Jack stood up. “I’m coming too.”

“I’m afraid not. Mr. Blunt prefers to see Alex on his own.”

“Then we’re leaving.”

Mrs. Jones shrugged. “That’s your choice. But you said on the telephone that you needed our help.”

“It’s all right, Jack.” Alex could see the way this was going, and he had quickly made his decision. It was always possible that Alan Blunt would agree to help him—but it would only be on his own terms.

Any argument and Alex would be thrown out in the street. It had happened before. “I don’t mind

seeing them on their own if that's what they want.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Jack nodded. “All right. I'll wait for you here.” She glanced at the magazines. “I can catch up with the latest banking news.”

Alex and Mrs. Jones walked over to the elevator, and she pressed the button for the sixteenth floor.

Only she knew that the button had read her fingerprint and that if she hadn't been authorized to travel up, two armed guards would have been waiting when she arrived. She was also aware of the thermal intensifier concealed behind the mirror, as well as the early warning chemical detector that had been added recently. Even the floor was examining the soles of Alex's shoes. The dust and residue under his feet might, in certain circumstances, provide valuable information about where he had been.

Mrs. Jones seemed more relaxed now that the two of them were on their own. “So, how is school going?” she asked.

“Okay,” Alex said. Mrs. Jones sounded friendly enough, but he had learned to treat even the most casual question with suspicion.

“And how was Scotland?”

How had she known he had gone to Scotland for the New Year? Did she know what had happened there? Alex decided to put her to the test. “I had a great time,” he said. “I really liked Loch Arkaig. In fact, I made quite an in-depth visit.”

Mrs. Jones didn't even blink. “I haven't been there myself.”

They arrived at the sixteenth floor and left the elevator, walking down a heavily carpeted corridor with doors that had numbers but no names. They stopped outside 1605. Mrs. Jones knocked, and without waiting for an answer, they went in.

Alan Blunt was sitting behind his desk as if he had been there forever, as if he never left. He was the same gray man in the same gray suit with the same files open in front of him. Sometimes Alex tried to imagine the head of Special Operations with a wife and children, going to a film or playing sports. But he couldn't do it. Like Mrs. Jones, Blunt had no life outside these four walls. Was that what he had dreamed about when he was young, being locked into a job that would never let him go? Had he actually ever been young?

“Sit down, Alex.” Blunt waved Alex to a chair without looking up from his paperwork. He wrote something down and underlined it. Alex wondered what he had just done. He could have been ordering extra office stationery. He could have just sentenced someone to death. The trouble with Blunt was that either way he would have shown the same lack of emotion.

He glanced briefly at Alex. “You're getting taller.” He sounded disapproving—but that made sense.

The younger and more innocent Alex looked, the more useful he was to MI6.

There was a long silence. Alex took the seat he had been offered. Mrs. Jones sat down beside the

desk.

Blunt made a few last notes, the nib of his pen scratching against the page. At last he finished what he was doing. "I understand you have a problem," he said.

Jack hadn't said very much on the telephone. She'd had enough dealings with MI6 to know that nobody says anything important on an unsecured line. So Alex quickly explained what had happened: the fight in the cemetery, Harry Bulman's visit, the newspaper story he was intending to write.

He finished talking. Blunt reached out and wiped a speck of dust off the surface of the desk.

"That's very interesting, Alex," he said. "But I'm not sure there's very much we can do."

"What?" Alex was astonished. "Why not?"

"Well, as you've often reminded us, you don't actually work for us. You're not part of MI6."

"That's never stopped you from using me."

"Perhaps not. But it's not our business to interfere with the freedom of the press. If this man, Bulman, has found out about your activities over the past year, there's not a great deal we can do. Are you asking us to arrange an accident?"

"No!" Alex was horrified. He wondered if Blunt was even being serious.

"Then what exactly do you have in mind?"

Alex drew a breath. Maybe Blunt was trying to confuse him deliberately. He wasn't sure how to respond. "Do you really want him to go ahead and write this story?" he asked.

"I don't see that it matters one way or another. We can always deny it."

"What about me?"

"You can deny it too."

He could. But it would make no difference. Once Bulman's report came out, his life would still be in pieces. In fact, if MI6 denied the story, it would only make it worse. Alex would be left out in the cold.

Once again, he felt a rising sense of anger. It was Blunt who had put him in this situation in the first place. Was he really going to sit back and wash his hands of the whole affair?

But then Mrs. Jones came to his rescue. "Maybe we could have a word with this journalist," she suggested. "It might be possible to make him see things from our point of view."

"Talking to him would only compromise us," Blunt insisted.

"I absolutely agree. But in view of what Alex has done for us in the past ..." She hesitated. "And what he might do for us in the future ..."

Blunt looked up, his eyes, behind the square gunmetal spectacles, locking into Alex's for the first time.

“Would you ever consider coming back?” he asked.

It was as if the thought had only just occurred to him, but suddenly Alex understood. Everything in this room had been rehearsed. Mrs. Jones had known he had been to Scotland. They knew exactly what was going on at Brookland. They probably even got copies of his homework. And of course, they had steered this conversation exactly where they wanted. These two never left anything to chance.

“There’s something you want,” Alex said. His voice was heavy.

“Not at all.” Blunt drummed his fingers. Then he seemed to remember something. He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a file that he laid in front of him. “Well, since you mention it, there is one thing. But it’s a very simple matter, Alex. Hardly even worthy of your talents.”

Alex leaned forward. The file that Blunt had selected was stamped with the usual red letters—TOP SECRET. But there was another word written underneath it in black ink. Alex read it upside down. GREENFIELDS. It meant something. Where had he heard it before? Then he remembered and he reeled back. He almost wanted to laugh. How did they do it?

Greenfields was the name of the research center that he was about to visit with the rest of his class. His biology teacher, Mr. Gilbert, had been talking about it only the day before.

“What do you know about genetic engineering?” Blunt demanded.

“I’ve been doing a project on it,” Alex said. “But you already know that, don’t you?”

“It’s an interesting subject,” Blunt continued in a tone of voice that suggested it was anything but.

“Genetic science can do incredible things. Grow tomatoes in the desert or oranges the size of melons. There’s no question that companies like Greenfields could change the way we live. Of course ...” He drew his fingers beneath his chin. “There are also certain dangers.”

“Whoever controls the food chain controls the world.” Alex remembered what Edward Pleasure had said when they were in Scotland.

“Exactly. Anything that puts too much power into the hands of one individual is of interest to us. And there is one individual working at Greenfields who is causing us particular concern.”

“His name is Leonard Straik,” Mrs. Jones said.

“Straik is the director and the chief science officer. Aged fifty-eight. Unmarried. He was a brilliant student, studying biology at Cambridge back in the seventies. He invented something called the Biolistic Particle Delivery System—also known as the gene gun. It uses helium pressure to fire new DNA into existing plant organisms ... something like that, anyway. The long and the short of it is that thanks to Straik, it’s become much easier to mass-produce GM seeds.

“For twenty years, Straik ran his own company— Leonard Straik Diagnostics ... or LSD, as it was called. It all went well for a time, but like many scientists, he was less brilliant when it came to business and the whole thing collapsed. Straik lost all his money and went freelance. Six years ago he was hired as the director of Greenfields, and he has been there ever since.”

“Why are you interested in him?”

“Because of something that happened a few months ago.” Blunt opened the file. “Last November, the police got a call from a whistle-blower inside the company, a bio-technician by the name of Philip Masters. He said he knew something about Straik and wanted to talk. Given the security implications, the police passed the information to us and we arranged a meeting—but one day before it could take place, there was an accident and Masters was killed. Apparently he came into contact with some sort of toxic material and it poisoned his entire nervous system. By the time he turned up in the local morgue, he was unrecognizable.”

“An accident ...”

“Exactly. It seemed a bit of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“We don’t like coincidences,” Mrs. Jones said.

“Since then, we’ve been taking a close look at Greenfields,” Blunt went on. “It’s a major operation. As well as research and development, it’s also one of the largest suppliers of genetically modified seeds in the world, using the gene gun that Straik pioneered. There are whole countries—in Africa and South America, for instance—that are dependent on them. We cannot risk having a loose cannon at the center of an operation like that. Masters knew something about Straik. We need to know what it was.”

Alex nodded. He was beginning to see where this was going.

“We’ve managed to put a tap on Straik’s telephone and we intercept all the calls he makes on his mobile. But we need more than that.”

“We want to get into his computers,” Mrs. Jones said.

Blunt nodded. “There may be nothing in all this. After all, people die all the time. Accidents happen and there are plenty of toxic plants on the site. I understand Straik keeps a whole greenhouse full of them. He’s been doing research into natural cures ... antivenoms. But we have to get someone into Greenfields—and it can’t be a security guard or a maintenance engineer. That’s exactly what he’d be expecting. We have to take a different approach.”

Alex had heard it all before. People with something to hide would always suspect an adult, particularly if they knew they were under surveillance. But nobody would think twice about a schoolboy on a class visit. Alex remembered what Mr. Gilbert had said. “*I didn’t think they’d allow school visits because so much of their work is secretive.*” But somehow they had been persuaded to make an exception for Brookland. Had MI6 been working quietly behind the scenes?

“It would be easy for you to slip away from the group during your visit,” Mrs. Jones continued. “And it would only take you thirty seconds to download everything from Straik’s computer.”

“Won’t it have a password?” Alex asked. “And how would I even get into his office?”

“We can have a word with Smithers about all that,” Blunt replied. “But it’s up to you, Alex. It seems fairly straightforward to me. We can’t even be sure that Straik is up to no good. It may all be a fuss about nothing. However, it seems that we can do each other a favor. You agree to help us and we’ll have a word with this man—Harry Bulman—and see if we can persuade him to leave you alone.”

Blunt smiled, but Alex wasn't fooled. He knew exactly what was going on. If he refused to help, his life would be torn apart. Blunt was pretending to offer him a choice, knowing exactly what Alex would do. The decision had already been made.

He should have expected it. He had agreed to walk into the lion's den—so he could hardly complain when he got scratched.

"It's a pleasure to see you as always, Alex," Smithers said. "I fancy you've grown a bit. Unless, of course, Mr. Blunt has supplied you with a pair of my new sneakers. I'm rather pleased with them, I must say."

"Do they fire missiles?" Alex asked.

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. They're for use by agents who need to change their appearance rapidly in the field. There's a hydraulic system built into the heel, and they can add three inches to your height."

"Do you have a name for them?"

Smithers folded his arms across his ample stomach. "Pumps!"

The two of them were sitting in Smithers's office on the eleventh floor. The room looked ordinary enough, but Alex knew that everything in sight actually disguised something else—from the X-ray angle floor lamp to the incinerator "out" tray. Even the filing cabinet concealed an elevator to the ground floor. Smithers was exactly as Alex remembered him. He was dressed in an old-fashioned three-piece suit that must have been specially tailored to fit his bulk, with a striped tie that was surely the old-school variety. As usual, there was a broad smile across his face and above his various chins. Smithers was the one agent in MI6 that Alex was always pleased to see. He was also the only person Alex trusted.

"So I understand you're going to look into Greenfields for us," Smithers continued. "Very good of you, Alex. I'm always amazed how helpful you are."

"Well, Mr. Blunt is very persuasive."

"That's certainly true. At least it shouldn't be too dangerous this time ... although do look out. That chap Masters was a bit of a mess. He'd definitely trodden on something that he shouldn't—so just make sure you look where you're going." Smithers coughed, realizing that he'd said too much, and continued hastily. "I'm sure no one will even notice you."

"How do I get into Straik's office?" Alex asked.

"I've got a few things for you right here." Smithers opened a drawer in his desk and took out an old-fashioned pencil case. It was made of tin, slightly battered, decorated with a picture of the Simpsons ... the sort of thing he might have been given for Christmas three or four years ago. "It's very unlikely that you'll be searched," Smithers explained. "But we know Greenfields has a very efficient security system, so better safe than sorry."

He pushed the case forward. "The tin is rather clever," he explained. "I actually developed it for international air travel. It has a lead lining so it won't show any of the hidden circuitry if it passes through an X-ray machine. But at the same time, there are silhouettes of pens and rulers fused inside

the lid, and if the tin is scanned, they'll show up as ghost images. You could carry anything you wanted inside and nobody would notice."

He opened the tin. Alex was surprised that it actually did contain pens and rulers—along with other pieces of school equipment. "Since this is a school trip, I've concealed all the gadgets inside things you might reasonably be expected to have with you," Smithers said. He picked out a rather large eraser with a pudgy finger and thumb. "The memory stick that you'll need for Straik's computer is inside this. Just tear open the eraser and plug it in. You won't need passwords or anything like that. It's completely automatic. In thirty seconds, everything that's inside the computer will be on the drive's memory."

He took out a library card. It was already stamped with Alex's name and had a magnetic strip on the back. "Straik's office will almost certainly be locked. This will get you in. It looks like a library card, but actually it's an all-purpose swipe card." He lifted the tin and for the first time Alex noticed a narrow slot near the bottom. "You take the library card and you swipe any door that you want to open. Then you feed it into the tin. There's a miniaturized flux reversal system hidden in the bottom. It will work out the code you need and reprogram the card. These are now standard equipment for all MI6 agents, although this is the first time I've hidden one in the bottom of a Simpsons pencil case!"

"How do I find Straik's office?" Alex asked.

"I'm working on that, Alex. Greenfields is a big place, and I doubt there'll be signs. But I've got a rather neat idea and I'll send it to you later."

Alex picked up a pencil sharpener. "What does this do?"

"It sharpens pencils." Smithers reached out for it. "But it also converts into a knife. It's tiny, of course, but the blade is diamond edged and will cut through almost anything. No need to worry about closed-circuit TV cameras... ." He took what looked like a small pocket calculator out of the tin. "Just press the plus button three times and it will send out a square wave frequency signal, which should jam any transmissions within fifty yards. On the subject of jam, it's almost time for tea. Would you like some?"

"No, thanks." Alex took the calculator. "Does it do anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, it's also an extremely sophisticated communications device. Press 911 and you can talk directly to us. It'll work anywhere in the world."

"911," Alex muttered. "In case of emergencies ..."

Smithers smiled. "And finally, I know you like your explosions, Alex, so you'll enjoy this." He took the last two items out of the tin.

"They look like pens," Alex said.

"Yes, they do. They're gel-ink pens ... but the gel in this instance is short for gelignite." Smithers held them in front of him. "There are two colors here. The red one is much more powerful than the black one. Remember that. It's the difference between blowing a door off its hinges and blowing the lock off a door. They both have time fuses concealed in the cap. Twist once for fifteen seconds, then

pull the plunger upward to activate. You have a delay of up to two minutes. They're also magnetic. And, of course, they write."

He put everything back into the tin and closed the lid.

"There you are, old chap. Everything you need ... nice and neat. I'm sure this mission is going to be a piece of cake—which reminds me once again that it really is time for tea. Are you sure you won't join me?"

"No, thanks, Mr. Smithers." Alex took the pencil case and got to his feet. "I'll see you."

"I'm sure you will, Alex. I don't know what it is about you, but you just don't seem able to stay away. Take care—and do come and see me again soon."

Back on the sixteenth floor, Alan Blunt was still behind his desk, listening as Mrs. Jones read from a report. It had been printed and handed to her only minutes before. There were just two pages: a black-and-white photograph followed by about fifty lines of text.

"Harry Bulman," she was saying. "Educated at Eton. Expelled when he was sixteen. Drugs. He went into the army, and it's true what he told Alex. He actually made it into the commandos, but they threw him out. Dishonorable discharge for cowardice. His unit came under attack in Afghanistan and he was found buried in a sand dune. He was hiding. After that, he managed to get odd jobs in journalism.

Writing about defense issues some of the time, but mainly it was just smut. Three-in-a-bed headlines and that sort of thing. Married and divorced. No children. Lives in north London. Thirty-seven years old."

There was a brief silence as Blunt took this in. Nothing showed behind his eyes, but Mrs. Jones knew that he would be considering every possibility and that within seconds he would have come up with a plan of attack. This was his great strength. It was the reason why he had headed up Special Operations for so long.

"Invisible Man," he said. He had made his decision. "We'll give it to Crawley. He hasn't been out in the field for a while. He'll enjoy it."

"Right." There was a shredder beside the desk. Mrs. Jones fed her copy of the report into it and the blades began to rotate. Harry Bulman was looking out from the photograph. There was a half smile on his face, as if he was pleased with himself. Slowly, he disappeared into the machine, sliced into ribbons, dropping into the bin below.

Chapter 9: INVISIBLE MAN

THERE WERE AT LEAST TEN THOUSAND GUESTS in the auditorium and they were all applauding. Harry Bulman made his way through the crowd, occasionally pausing to shake hands and to receive congratulations from people he didn't even know. Ahead of him, the stage beckoned. A dozen golden statuettes stood in a line and one of them had his name on it: Journalist of the Year. It was glimmering in the spotlight, twice the size of any of the others, and as he walked toward it, it seemed to grow even bigger. At the same time, a bell began to ring and ...

He woke up. It was eight o'clock in the morning and his alarm had just gone off.

It had been a dream, of course, but a very pleasant one—and Bulman had no doubt that very soon it would become a reality.

He was going to be famous. Newspaper editors who were usually too busy to give him the time of day would be lining up to employ him. There would be television talk shows, celebrity parties, lots of awards. It occurred to him that maybe he had been a little too generous offering Alex fifty percent of his earnings. After all, he was the one doing all the work. It was *his* story. Maybe forty or even thirty percent would have been closer to the mark. In fact, at the end of the day, the journalist didn't need to pay him anything at all. It wasn't as if Alex could do anything about it.

It was incredible, really, that the two of them had finally met. Bulman remembered the first time he had heard the story of a teenage spy. It had been in a pub, the Crown on Fleet Street, a late-night drinking session with an old friend in the police who had been at the Science Museum when the parachutist came through the roof. He hadn't believed it then, but something had told him to stick with it, and very soon he had found himself on what had become nothing less than a quest. He had spent months doggedly following leads that had gone nowhere, meeting contacts who had clammed up at the last moment, calling in favors, and, when necessary, making threats. Piece by piece he had put the story together. And in the end it had led him to Alex.

Bulman slept in a circular bed with black silk sheets on the top floor of a modern block of apartments in Chalk Farm. His bedroom had views of the railway lines leading into Euston Station. The place had been built only twenty years ago but already there were cracks appearing, maybe because of the vibrations from the trains. One was passing now. When he had first moved in here, the grinding wheels used to wake him up, but he had soon grown used to it. Now he quite liked it. He wouldn't have been able to afford the place if it had been anywhere quieter.

It was the start of a new week. Seven days since he had been in Alex's Chelsea flat. In the end, he had decided to give the boy time to work things out and to recognize he had no alternative but to work with him. He and that housekeeper of his would have talked things over and probably blamed each other for what had happened. Now that he thought about it, maybe that was another interesting angle. The girl—

Jack—was quite pretty. What was she doing, living with a fourteen-year-old boy? The *National Enquirer* would like that! Well, this afternoon Bulman would go back. He would be there waiting with a glass of white wine and a digital recorder when Alex finished school.

He threw back the covers and went into the kitchen, where the plates from dinner last night—and the night before—were still stacked up in the sink. Bulman enjoyed good food, but he couldn't be bothered to cook for himself and the packaging from frozen meals was spilling out of the garbage. He found a clean mug and made himself a coffee, glancing at the newspaper articles that were pinned to a corkboard above the sink. "Secrets of Army's Basra Breakfast." "Intelligence Chief Appears on Face-book." "SAS Commander Misses Flight." He wasn't proud of his work. Nobody took much notice of what he wrote, and the stories were always nearer the back of the paper than the front. What did it matter, anyway? They were read and then forgotten ... if they were read at all.

That would all change soon.

Bulman opened the fridge. He took out the milk and sniffed it. It was sour. He poured it into the sink and drank his coffee black. What was he going to do until four o'clock? It was a beautiful day, a cold January sun glinting off the railway tracks. He watched a second train rumble past on its way into town, packed with commuters on their way to their boring jobs. He could almost imagine them, squashed into the newspapers they were trying to read. A month from now, those newspapers would belong to him.

A late breakfast. Shopping. A couple of beers at the Groucho Club in Soho. He mapped out his day as he got dressed in his usual open-neck shirt, blazer, and slacks. He never wore jeans. He liked to look stylish. He fastened the shirt with brightly polished silver cuff links, each one decorated with a miniature engraving of the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger, used by the commandos since the Second World War. Finally, he scooped up the briefcase that he always carried with him, grabbed his wallet from the bedside table, finished his coffee, and went out.

There was a newsstand opposite the apartment with a display showing the morning headlines.

"Journalist Killed." He couldn't help smiling as he read the words. He wondered if it was somebody he knew, probably taking a bullet in Afghanistan or somewhere else in the Middle East. He had often tried to get himself sent abroad ("... our man, Harry Bulman, entrenched with the allied forces in Iraq ..."), but none of the editors had been interested. Well, serves the guy right, whoever he was. Probably some stupid amateur who didn't know when to duck.

He was about to cross the road and buy the paper when he remembered that he had used the last of his change down at the pub the night before. He'd been drinking with a couple of freelance journalists and somehow they'd all ended up around the slot machine, shoveling coins in. At one stage he'd won more than twenty-five dollars, but of course he'd put it all back in again and lost it. That was his problem. He never knew when to stop. He took out his wallet and opened it. All he had was a couple of credit cards.

He had no money at all.

The nearest cash machine was at the traffic lights on the other side of Camden Market. Bulman thought about walking, but as luck would have it, a bus appeared at that exact moment, rumbling toward him down the hill. At least he had his pass ... it was valid for any subway or bus in London. He hurried over to the bus stop, arriving just as the driver pulled in and the doors hissed open. A couple of people got on ahead of him, but then it was his turn. He pressed his card against the scanner. The

machine made a discouraging sound.

“I’m sorry, mate,” the driver said. “You’ve got nothing left on your card.”

“That’s not possible,” Bulman replied. “I took the subway last night and I had about thirty dollars left on it.”

“Well, it’s showing zero now.” The driver pointed at the screen.

“Your machine must be broken.”

“It worked for everyone else.”

Bulman held his card against the screen for a second time—but with the same result. He glanced around. The bus was crowded with people waiting to move off. They were all watching him impatiently. “All right.” He scowled. “I’ll give you the cash.”

But even as he reached into his pocket, he remembered that he didn’t have any cash. The driver was glaring at him now. Bulman gave up. The bank was only a quick walk away. The sun was shining.

“Forget it,” he muttered. “I’ll walk.”

He stepped back onto the sidewalk. The doors closed and the bus moved off. Bulman was still holding his travel pass. He glared at it. When he had a spare minute, he would send a letter to Transport for London to complain. Maybe he would even write a newspaper article about his experience. Idiots. Why couldn’t they get the technology to work?

It took him ten minutes to walk down to the bank, by which time it was almost nine o’clock. All around him, the shops were opening. People were hurrying out of the coffee shops, clutching their oversized cups, then disappearing into their offices ... another busy London day. Propping his briefcase under his arm, Bulman selected a debit card and fed it into the machine. He needed money for breakfast, to pick up a few groceries—and later on, he might treat himself to a taxi over to Chelsea. He punched in his PIN, touched the box for \$50, and waited.

The screen went black. Then a message came up.

Bulman stared at the screen, then punched the Cancel button to get his card back. Nothing happened.

Not only was the machine refusing to give him any money, it had decided to keep his card! There was nothing wrong with the account, he was sure of it. The last time he’d looked, he’d had over four hundred dollars in it. Someone must have vandalized the ATM, some lout who’d had too much to drink.

He’d have to find another cash machine and use his credit card for a cash advance. He walked only a block before finding one. Very cautiously, he typed in his PIN, taking care not to make any mistakes.

The same thing happened. A blank screen. A stark white message. His card was swallowed up.

He swore. A couple of people had lined up to use the same machine and they were looking at him with a sort of pity, as if they imagined that he was broke, that there was nothing in his account. What was he to do now? He was angry, humiliated, and hungry—he needed breakfast. He had no money and no way to travel.

Unless, of course, he used his car. Bulman had a secondhand Volkswagen parked around the corner from his apartment. He didn't often use it during the day—there was far too much traffic in London for his taste—but he sometimes drove it at night, and he kept a spare twenty-dollar bill in the glove compartment for emergencies. That wouldn't buy him much, but it was better than nothing and he could use it for breakfast while he waited for the bank to open. He'd feel better with a bit of food inside him. Then he'd go in to the bank and shout at the silly fat girl behind the teller's desk. (In his experience, bank tellers were always silly and fat.) And once it was sorted, he would get on with his day.

He found the side street and strolled down to the spot where he'd parked.

The car wasn't there.

Bulman stood on the sidewalk, blinking. He had the beginnings of a headache. He had definitely parked in this spot. He might have had a few too many drinks that evening—and, yes, he was probably well over the limit—but he was certain this was where he had left it. Now there was a blue Volvo in his space. He looked up and down the road. There was no sign of his Volkswagen. He forced himself to think. Dinner, pub, slot machine, one last drink, then home around midnight. The car had to be here.

And yet it wasn't.

It had been stolen! Cars were always being taken in this part of town! A lot of the residents had those clumsy-looking locks that fit over the steering wheel ... but he had never bought one.

He shook his head. What a day this was turning into! He'd be in a bad mood when he caught up with Alex Rider later this afternoon. It would be their first session together—but even so, he was going to give the boy a hard time.

First things first. Bulman took out his mobile phone to call the police. He wondered what number to use. This wasn't really an emergency, but he decided to call 911 anyway. He thumbed the buttons and held the phone to his ear.

Nothing.

It wasn't ringing. There wasn't even a dial tone. Bulman brought the phone down—it was a brand-new BlackBerry—and examined it.

This was ridiculous. He was in the middle of the city. There was always a signal here. He walked a few paces up the sidewalk, held the phone up, tried it at a different angle. The message remained the same.

He squeezed the phone so tightly that he was almost crushing it.

He forced himself to calm down. There was an old-fashioned telephone booth at the end of the road. He wouldn't need coins to make a 911 call. He would contact the police from there.

He retraced his steps and entered the phone booth. It was plastered with advertisements for models and smelled of cigarette smoke and urine. At least the phone itself seemed to be working. He balanced his briefcase against the glass and made the call.

“Which service do you require?” the operator asked him.

“My car has been stolen,” Bulman said. He was almost relieved to hear another human voice. “I need to speak to the police.”

There was a pause and he was put through.

“I’d like to report a stolen car,” he said. “I parked it on Chilton Street last night and now it’s gone.”

“Can I have the license plate number?” It was a woman’s voice. She didn’t sound very concerned. She also spoke with a foreign accent, making him wonder if he’d been rerouted to a call center abroad.

Forcing himself not to lose his temper, he gave the license number. “KL06NZG.”

“KL06NZG?”

“Yes.”

“Is that a green Mercedes SLR Coupe?”

“No!” Bulman shut his eyes. His headache was getting worse. “It’s a silver Volkswagen Golf.”

“Can you give me the license number again?”

Bulman repeated it, pausing between each digit. Whoever was at the other end of the line obviously didn’t have much skill with computers.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The woman was adamant. “That number is registered to a Mercedes. Can I take your name?”

“It’s Bulman. Harold Edward Bulman.”

“And your address?”

He told her.

“Could you hold a moment?” There was another silence, longer this time. Bulman was about to hang up when the woman came back on the line. “Mr. Bulman, how long have you had this car?”

“I bought it two years ago.”

“I’m afraid we have no record of that name or that address on our files.”

This was the end. Bulman lost his temper. “Are you telling me that I don’t know where I live and that I’ve forgotten the make and the color of my own car? I’m telling you, my car has been stolen. I left it here last night, and now it’s gone.”

“I’m sorry, sir. The license number you’ve given us doesn’t match up with the information I have here.”

“Well, your information is wrong.” Bulman slammed the phone down. His head was throbbing.

He needed money. He felt naked without cash and he wanted to eat. He looked at his watch. At least that was still working. Half past nine. The banks would have opened by now. Bulman had plenty of ID

on him, and he'd feel better once he had a full wallet. He could deal with the car later.

He turned and walked back the way he had come. Ten minutes later, he found himself in the local branch of his bank, talking to one of the managers who had a desk in the main hall. The manager was a young man, Asian, dressed in a suit, with a neat beard. He was clearly alarmed as this new customer came striding up to him, and Bulman realized that, what with all the tramping back and forth, trying to deal with all the events that seemed to have ganged up on him in the past hour, he must look half crazed. He no longer cared.

"I need to withdraw some money," he said. "And your machine doesn't seem to be working."

The manager frowned. "We haven't had any complaints."

"It doesn't matter. I don't need to use the machine. I want to withdraw some money from you."

"Do you have a card, sir?" Bulman handed over his last remaining credit card and watched as the manager brought up his details on the computer. He gazed at the screen, perplexed. "I'm very sorry, sir ..."

"Are you saying I don't have an account with you?" Bulman's voice was quavering.

"No, sir. You used to have an account. But you closed it down a year ago. You can see for yourself."

He swiveled the computer around and there it was, a row of zeroes at the bottom of his account. Every last penny had been removed exactly twelve months before.

"I never closed my account," Bulman said.

"Would you like me to talk to the head office? ..."

Yet Bulman was already gone, spinning out of the chair and making his way through the main door, out into the fresh air. What the hell was going on? His travel pass, then the bank cards, his mobile phone, his car, now his accounts ... it was as if his identity was being taken from him one piece at a time. He leaned against the corner of the building, steadying himself, and as he stood there, a commuter hurried past, throwing a copy of his newspaper into a bin right in front of him, almost as if he wanted Bulman to see what was on the front page.

It was a photograph of himself.

Bulman gazed at it in horror, remembering the headline that he had seen as he came out of his apartment. "Journalist Killed." He was looking at the same headline now. He felt the sidewalk lurching underneath him as he stepped forward and plucked the newspaper out. The story was very short.

Harold Bulman, a freelance journalist who specialized in stories relating to the army and intelligence services, was yesterday morning found dead in his north London apartment. Mr.

Bulman, 37, had been stabbed. Police today appealed for any witnesses who might have seen or heard anything between ten o'clock and midnight to come forward. Detective Chief Superintendent Stephen Leather, who is heading the investigation, said: "Mr. Bulman may well have made himself enemies in his line of work, and at this stage we are not ruling anything out."

Harold Bulman was unmarried and had no close family or friends.

It was him. They were saying he was dead! How could they have made a mistake like that? Was this the reason why his phone wasn't working, why there was no money in his account? Suddenly it all made sense. Somehow he'd been confused with somebody else. And as a result, a whole series of switches had been pulled as, automatically, his life was turned off.

He had to get to a telephone. He had to talk to his editors, to the people who employed him. He had no money. But there was a telephone in his apartment. That was the answer. Bulman didn't want to be on the street anymore, anyway. He had become a non-person, an invisible man. For some reason, he felt exposed. How could he be sure that there wasn't someone out there who really did want to stab him?

He had to get back inside.

He was sweating by the time he got back to his apartment, and his hand shook as he tried to force the key into the lock. It didn't seem to want to go in. In the end, after three attempts, he realized that the key didn't fit. And that was impossible too. Wasn't it? He had used it only last night! But someone in the last twelve hours had gone out and changed the lock.

"Let me in!" he shouted. There was nobody to listen to him. He was shouting at the glass door and the brickwork. "Let me in!" He kicked the door, using the sole of his foot. But the glass was reinforced, shatterproof, and the door was held in place by powerful magnetic plates. He kicked out a third time.

He was screaming now. Anyone passing would think he was insane.

"Are you all right, sir? Can I help you?"

He hadn't heard the police car draw in behind him, but when he turned around, there were two policemen standing on the sidewalk. Bulman was glad to see them. After all, he'd been trying to call them just a few minutes ago.

"I'm locked out," he said.

"Do you live here, sir?"

"Well, obviously I live here. If I didn't live here, I wouldn't be trying to get in." Bulman realized he was being rude. He tried to force a smile to his face. "I have a home on the top floor," he explained.

"This has never happened before ..."

"Can I try for you?"

Bulman noticed that the policeman had dropped the "sir." He handed the keys over and watched as the policeman tried them in the lock—also without success. The policeman examined the keys, then the lock. He straightened up. "You're not going to open this door with these keys," he said. "The lock is Banham. These keys are Yale."

"But that's not possible ..."

"What's your name?" the second policeman asked.

“It’s Harry Bulman. I’m a journalist.”

“And you say you live here?”

“I don’t just say I live here. I do live here. But I’m locked out.”

“Just one moment, sir.”

The first policeman was talking on his radio. Bulman passed his briefcase from one hand to the other. It was suddenly feeling very heavy. Considering it was only January, the weather was far too hot. The second policeman was looking at him suspiciously. He was only about nineteen years old, with light brown hair and stick-out ears. He still had a schoolboy face.

“Are you sure this is where you live?” the first policeman asked. He had finished his radio conversation.

“Yes. Apartment thirty-seven. On the top floor.”

“There was a Harold Bulman, a journalist, registered to this address, but he was killed two nights ago.”

“No. That was in the newspapers. I just read it. But it’s a mistake. I’m Harry Bulman.”

“Would you have any identification on you?”

“Of course I have.” Bulman took out his wallet. But two of his credit cards had been taken by the cash machines, and he had left the third in the bank. His driver’s license was in the apartment. His fingers were shaking as he fumbled through his wallet. “I can give you ID once I get into my home,” he said.

The two policemen looked at each other. The younger one seemed to notice Bulman’s briefcase for the first time. “What are you carrying?” he asked.

The question took Bulman by surprise. “Why do you want to know?” he snapped.

Before he could stop him, the first policeman had picked up the briefcase. “Do you mind if we look inside?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I do.”

It was already too late. The policeman opened the briefcase and was looking at the contents, his face full of horror. With a sense that his whole life was draining away from him, Bulman leaned forward. He knew what was inside: a notepad, a couple of magazines, pens and pencils.

He was wrong. The policeman was holding the case open, and Bulman could clearly see a kitchen knife, about fifteen inches long, the blade covered in dried blood.

“Wait ... ,” he began.

The two policemen acted incredibly quickly. Without even knowing quite what had happened, Bulman found himself facedown on the sidewalk with his arms gripped behind his back. He felt the metal edges of the handcuffs bite into his flesh as they clicked shut. The first policeman was back on his radio, talking rapidly. Seconds later, there was a screech of tires and another police car drew up. More uniformed officers surrounded him.

“You have the right to remain silent ...”

Bulman realized that he was being told his rights, but the words didn't quite register. They were booming in his ears. He felt himself being picked up and propelled toward the car. A hand was placed on his head to stop him from banging against the door frame. And then he was inside, being driven away at speed. They had even turned the sirens on.

An hour later, Bulman found himself alone in a bare brick interrogation room with a window set so high up, it showed only a small square of sky. They had taken his fingerprints and a swab from the inside of his mouth, which he knew would be used to check his DNA. There were two new officers sitting opposite him. They were older and more experienced than the men who had made the arrest, heavyset and serious. They had introduced themselves as Bennett and Ainsworth. Ainsworth seemed to be the senior of the two, bald, with small, hard eyes and a mouth that could have been drawn with a single pencil line. Bennett was slightly younger and looked as if he had recently been in a fistfight. He was holding a file.

Bulman had been given a little time to collect his thoughts. He had worked out what he was going to say. “Listen to me,” he began. “This is all a stupid mistake. The way you've treated me is outrageous. I am a well-known journalist, and I'm warning you—”

“It's good to see you, Jeremy,” Bennett interrupted.

“That's not my name.”

“Jeremy Harwood. Did you really think we wouldn't find you?” Ainsworth laid the file on the table and opened it. Bulman saw a black-and-white police photograph. Once again he recognized himself.

But it had this other name underneath it.

He drew a breath. “My name is not Jeremy Harwood. My name is Harold Bulman.”

“Harold Bulman is dead.”

“No.”

“We've already analyzed the blood we found on the knife in your briefcase. It's Bulman's. You killed him.”

“No. You're making a mistake. This is all wrong.” Bulman fought for control. How could this nightmare be happening?

Ainsworth flicked a page in a file. There were fingerprints—ten of them in a row—and what looked like a chemical formula. “We've checked your DNA and your fingerprints, Jeremy. They all match up.

There's no need to pretend anymore.”

“You escaped from Broadmoor two months ago,” Bennett said.

Broadmoor? Bulman blinked heavily. That was where they sent the most dangerous prisoners in the country, the ones who were considered criminally insane.

“Why did you kill Harold Bulman?” Bennett asked.

“I ... I ...” Bulman tried to find the answer, but the words wouldn’t come. Something had happened to his thinking process. He was aware that there were tears trickling down his cheeks.

“Don’t worry, Jeremy,” Ainsworth said. He sounded almost kind. “We’re going to take you back. You’ll be safe, locked up in your cell. You won’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“You’ll be taken back to Broadmoor this afternoon,” Bennett added.

“No ...” The room was spinning in ever-increasing circles. Bulman gripped the table, trying to slow it down. “You can’t—”

“We can. The arrangements have already been made.”

The door suddenly opened and a third man came in. From the very start he didn’t look anything like a policeman. He was more like a retired colonel, about fifty, with thinning hair and a face that was hurrying toward old age. He was wearing a suit that didn’t match his brown suede shoes. “Thank you,”

he said. “I’ll take over now.”

He didn’t exactly radiate authority, but there was something in his voice, an edge of steel, that cut straight to the point. The two detectives stood up immediately and left. The man took their place at the table, opposite Bulman. His eyes were empty and cold.

“My name is Crawley,” he said. Bulman was still crying. There were tears dripping out of his nose. Crawley reached into his pocket and took out a tissue. “Use this,” he suggested.

Bulman wiped his nose and ran a sleeve across his eyes.

“I work for the intelligence services,” Crawley explained. “A branch of MI6.”

And suddenly Bulman understood. It was like being slapped across the face. MI6! Who else could have twisted his life out of shape with such ease? If he hadn’t been so terrified, he would have been furious with himself. He should have expected something like this. “Alex Rider ... ,” he rasped.

“I’m not saying I’ve ever heard of Alex Rider,” Crawley responded. His voice was utterly flat. “But I am going to tell you this. I could snap my fingers now and a van would take you to a mental hospital and lock you up, and that is where you would spend the rest of your life. Harry Bulman would be dead and you’d be the lunatic who killed him.”

“But ... but ...” Bulman couldn’t talk. He could barely breathe.

“For that matter, I could eliminate you now myself,” Crawley continued. “I actually know thirty-seven different ways to kill you in a manner that will look completely natural. Some of them are quick. Some of them hurt.” He paused. “But those are not my instructions. I’ve been told to give you another chance.”

“You bastard.” Bulman was crying again.

“You can go home now. You can forget all about this. But if you ever go anywhere near Alex Rider

again, if you approach any newspaper editor, if you so much as mention his name, we will hear about it, and next time we won't be so generous. We will wipe you off the face of the earth. Do you understand me?"

Bulman said nothing. Crawley stood up.

"From now on, we'll be watching you, Mr. Bulman," he said. "Every minute of every day. Please believe me. This was just a lesson. Next time it'll be for real."

He left the room.

Bulman stayed where he was. *Alex Rider*. The two words thundered through his head. *Alex Rider*. He knew that he would never write his story. His hopes of a major scoop had been destroyed, along with all his riches. He dragged himself to his feet. He was still trembling. *Alex Rider*. How he wished he had never heard the name.

Chapter 10: GREENFIELDS

THE BUS HEADED WEST DOWN THE HIGHWAY, turning off at Junction 15, near Swindon. It passed through the attractive town of Marlborough, then on toward the vast area of empty grassland that was Salisbury Plain.

There was nowhere quite like it in the whole of England. Three hundred square miles in area, it had been inhabited long before the Romans had arrived. Stone henge stood on its southern edge. Traces of hill forts dating back to the Iron Age were still dotted around. The plain was used by the army, frequently shut down for night exercises using tons of live ammunition. And one small part of it had been leased out to Greenfields for a research center that the authorities had decided was best kept hidden, in the middle of nowhere.

Alex Rider was sitting in the back of the bus next to Tom Harris and James Hale. There were forty students from Brookland on the trip, along with two teachers—Mr. Gilbert and a prim, slightly nervous woman named Miss Barry, who taught music but who had been included to help with discipline. They had been driving for over two hours now and the initial excitement had long since faded away, replaced by the dull sense of endlessness that comes with any highway journey.

Alex took out the postcard that had arrived the day before. It showed a picture of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. On the back, someone had written a date—2/25—and a message: *Paris is beautiful and fortunately we didn't manage to get lost. I hope you have a great time.* The signature was unreadable, but Alex recognized Smithers's writing. He had been expecting the card, and Smithers had told him how to use it. He slipped it away and turned to Tom.

"Can you do me a favor?" he said casually.

"Sure. What sort of favor?"

"While we're on this trip, I might have to disappear for a bit. So if there's any roll call, could you answer when you hear my name?"

Tom frowned. He spoke quietly so his voice wouldn't carry above the sound of the engine. "The last time you asked me to cover for you, we were in Venice," he said. "You're not doing that stuff again, are you?"

Alex nodded gloomily. He wasn't going to lie to his best friend.

"But I thought you'd finished with all that."

"Yeah. Me too. But it didn't quite work out that way." Alex sighed. "It's not anything dangerous, Tom.

And it shouldn't take very long. I just don't want anyone to notice I'm missing."

"Okay. Don't get yourself killed."

They had been following a series of minor roads through swathes of green countryside that stretched

to every horizon. This wasn't the England of pretty fields and hedgerows. There was something ancient and untamed about Salisbury Plain. It seemed to be completely deserted, with nothing—no buildings, no fences, no power lines, no people—for as far as the eye could see. There were a few clumps of trees huddled together on the hillsides, boulders and bits of debris thrown carelessly around. The wind was rippling through the grass, making strange patterns, like silent music chasing ahead of them as they rumbled slowly toward the top of a hill.

“Here it is,” James said.

He was right. The Greenfields research facility had suddenly appeared in front of them, concealed in a miniature valley. It was somehow shocking after so much emptiness, like a glass-and-steel city, or perhaps a prison, or even a colony on another planet. It certainly looked completely alien here, in the middle of Wiltshire. The complex was shaped like a diamond, completely surrounded by a fence with links so tightly meshed that it was almost like a metal wall, glinting in the sun. A single sliding gate, heavily guarded, stood at the end of the tarmac road. At least the guards didn't seem to be armed—but they looked threatening enough, even without weapons.

“What is this place?” James muttered, staring out the window. “It seems like a lot of fuss for a bunch of vegetables.”

There were about twenty buildings on the other side of the fence. Many of them were indeed greenhouses, but they were enormous, taller and more solid than anything that might be found in any garden. The rest were either offices, warehouses, or factories, most of them low-rise but some of them five or six stories high, with radio antennas, satellite dishes, and tall silver chimneys built onto the roofs. To one side, Alex saw what might have been a welcome center, sleek and white. A second building right next to the gate was square and solid with a sign marked SECURITY. But his eye was drawn to the construction at the very center of the complex. It was a huge dome, like something out of a science-fiction film, filled with vegetation. He could make out the leaves of palm trees licking at the glass, twenty or thirty yards high. Vines and knotted foliage hung down on all sides. It was connected to other buildings by four glass corridors, radiating out like points on a compass. The Biosphere, Alex thought. He didn't know where he had gotten the name from, but it seemed right.

Greenfields looked brand-new. There was a network of black tarmac roads separated by perfect rectangles of freshly mown grass. Or perhaps the grass had been genetically programmed to grow to exactly the right height. Silent electric vehicles were ferrying men and women from place to place.

Some of them—presumably the scientists—were wearing white coats. Others were in suits. The guards wore green camouflage jackets, as if to remind themselves that the environment was what this was supposed to be all about. And everywhere, on dozens of poles and on the sides of every building, sophisticated cameras and light sensors gazed down from every angle so that if a single wasp or bee had flown in, someone somewhere would have known.

There was a loud whine inside the bus as Mr. Gilbert turned on the intercom system. “Please don't be alarmed by all the security,” he said. His voice, amplified and relayed through the speakers, didn't sound very confident. “A lot of the work that they do here at Greenfields is sensitive. They have to protect themselves from competitors and from journalists and that sort of thing—and some of the plants they grow here have to be contained. I'm afraid we are all going to have to be searched as we

go in—

but it shouldn't take long. Please remember to leave all cameras and mobile phones inside the bus.

They'll be perfectly safe here, and they won't be allowed inside."

There were general groans and protests, but as they drew closer to the gate, everyone began to open their backpacks, doing as they were told. They'd been on school trips before, but they weren't used to blank-faced guards and body searches. "I hope you know what you're doing," Tom muttered, glancing at Alex. Alex didn't reply. "*It's a very simple matter. Hardly worthy of your talents.*" He remembered Blunt describing the job. Why should he have been surprised by another lie?

The bus slowed down and stopped. They had reached the gate, which slid open slowly to allow them into a holding area. Someone rapped on the door and the driver opened it to allow a thin, unsmiling woman to step inside. Mr. Gilbert stood up and held out a hand, but she ignored him.

"Good afternoon," she said. Her voice was clipped and somehow artificial. She sounded like a speak-your-weight machine. "May I welcome you to Greenfields Bio Center. I am the supervisor here at Greenfields." She paused, running her eyes over the passengers as if committing the faces to memory.

"My name is Dr. Myra Beckett, and I will be looking after you during your visit."

It was hard to say how old Beckett might be. She was a severe, very masculine woman in a white coat that hung loose from her shoulders and somehow defined her. There was so little emotion in her face that it was hard to imagine her doing anything that didn't involve books, Bunsen burners, and bottles of chemicals. Her dark hair was cut short, with bangs that cut diagonally across her forehead, the last strands touching her left eye. She wore circular, gold-framed spectacles that looked cheap and didn't flatter her. It was obvious that she didn't care about her appearance. She had no makeup and no jewelry.

She made no effort to be polite.

"We have not had a visit from a school before," she continued. "We will be showing you our laboratories, some of our cultivation centers, and finally, there will be a lecture on GM technology by one of our experts. Any photography or recording is forbidden. When you leave this bus, every one of you will be searched. This was agreed with your school when you were invited. All mobile telephones are to be left behind. You will follow me now, please."

"What a charming woman," Tom muttered.

"Yeah. I'm really glad we came," James agreed.

The supervisor had climbed off. The two teachers and the rest of the Brookland crowd followed her into the square building that had been designed exactly like a security area in an airport. There were uniformed men standing behind silver tables, X-rays for hand luggage, and metal detectors that everyone would have to pass through. Alex was one of the first to be searched. He watched as his backpack, with the pencil case inside, disappeared into one of the machines. At the same time, he was briskly patted down by a tight-lipped guard. The postcard that Smithers had sent him was in his inside pocket, and the guard pulled it out, glanced at the picture of the Eiffel Tower, then handed it back to

him. His backpack appeared on the other side of the machine, but before he could reach it, another security man picked it up.

“Is this yours?”

“Yes.” Alex nodded. All around him, his friends were being processed.

It was as if the guard sensed that something was wrong. He examined Alex, then opened the backpack and looked inside.

“It’s just my schoolwork,” Alex said.

The guard ignored him. He rifled through the books, then took out the pencil case and opened that too. For a moment Alex was certain that every alarm in the place was about to go off. The guard took out the rubber eraser and turned it over between his fingers. But then, as if he had suddenly lost interest, he shoved everything back into the bag and handed it over.

“Next!”

Alex joined the others at the far end of the security hall. He noticed that Mr. Gilbert was looking fairly disgruntled, and he understood why. They were only on a school outing. They were being treated as though they might all be terrorists.

Beckett didn’t seem to care. “We will now proceed into the complex,” she announced. “Please stay together. Before we log in, does anyone need to use the toilet?” There was silence. “Good. Then come this way... .” She led them to a final barrier, and Alex noticed they were counted electronically as they passed through.

But at last they were inside Greenfields. Beckett gathered them in a group, standing in the open air with the great dome behind them. Now that he was closer to the glass, Alex could see that there was an entire ecosystem contained on the other side. Exotic-looking trees sprouted in all directions like green fireworks photographed just as they went off. There were strange plants and bushes fighting for space, some of them carrying ugly, brilliant-colored berries or fruit. It had to be hot inside. A thick layer of steam hung in the air and Alex noticed beads of moisture trickling down the panes. To his surprise, there was a movement and a man appeared briefly, covered from head to toe in a white protective suit.

He was inside the dome, carrying a piece of measuring equipment. He stood briefly by the window.

Then he was gone.

“You are going to be with us for two hours,” Beckett began. She didn’t sound pleased. Indeed, she was making it clear that this entire visit was an irritation. “We will start by looking at some of the laboratories where you will see some of our techniques, including genetic transformation, cloning, and the particle delivery system—we call it the gene gun—that fires new DNA into plants. The gene gun was developed by our director, Leonard Straik. You will visit some of the greenhouses and storage facilities where we cultivate and store fruits and vegetables, some of which have never before existed on this planet. After that, you will be taken to our lecture theater.” She pointed at the white building that Alex had noticed from the brow of the hill. “There will be a discussion about the

need for GM

technology and the ways that it can help the future of the planet. And finally”—she smiled so briefly that it seemed to be no more than a nervous twitch—“you are invited to our canteen for a cup of our own Greenfields Bio Center Blend coffee, which has been genetically modified to deliver a more satisfying flavor.

“Please do not at any time separate from the group. This is the very first occasion that we have opened our doors for a school visit, and some of the guards are a little nervous. I would be very sorry if any of you delightful young people were asked to leave. Also, do not touch anything. You will be standing close to many chemicals and plant specimens. Any of them could be dangerous. Are there any questions?”

“What’s in there?” someone asked.

Beckett turned around and looked at the central greenhouse. For a moment her eyes seemed to flash behind the circular lenses. “We call that the Poison Dome,” she explained. “For many years, Greenfields has been researching natural poisons ... which is to say toxins such as ricin and botulin, which occur in nature and have the ability to kill human beings. Inside the Poison Dome, we grow some of the deadliest plants on the planet, including water hemlock, deadly nightshade, elephant’s ear, death cap mushrooms, and castor beans. The manzanilla tree has attractive fruit that you may choose to swallow. If you do so, it will kill you instantly. There is also a white resin dripping out of it that will blister your skin or blind you. The leaves of the ongaonga from New Zealand only need to touch you to produce hideous burns. It might interest you to know that a common nettle that you may find growing in your garden—*Urtica dioica*—injects you with five neurotransmitters when it stings you. The nettles inside the Poison Dome have been genetically modified so that they will sting you with five hundred neurotransmitters. I would like to imagine the pain of such a death, but in truth, I do not have enough imagination.”

She took out a tissue and touched it briefly against her lips.

“We are particularly interested in the way poisons interact,” she continued. “So you will also find animal life in there, including specimens of the blue dart frog, which releases lethal toxins from its skin, the banana spider, the taipan snake, and the marbled cone snail. A single drop of its slime can kill an elephant.” She paused and looked around the group. “If any of you would like to visit the Poison Dome, please let me know. Your visit will probably last about fifteen seconds before you die horribly.”

Nobody spoke. Miss Barry, the music teacher, had gone very pale.

“Very well. Let us head over to the first laboratory. I will ask your teacher to take a roll call when we enter and again when we leave.”

Tom Harris glanced at Alex, looking more doubtful by the minute. Alex shrugged. He was remembering what Blunt had told him about Philip Masters, how the whistle-blower had died. His body had been unrecognizable when it was found, and now Alex had a good idea what might have happened to him. Well, here was certainly one area of the Bio Center he’d be careful to avoid.

They went into one of the taller buildings with a steel chimney rising above them and smoke trickling into the sky. Beckett let them in using an electronic swipe card that she carried around her neck, and they passed into a clean, uncluttered passageway, where Mr. Gilbert took their names. As they set off once again, Alex made sure he was lingering near the back. They passed a restroom. Quickly he nudged Tom, who nodded back, and without hesitating Alex suddenly ducked sideways, throwing his weight against the door and plunging inside.

Suddenly he was alone, standing in a white-tiled room with two sinks and two mirrors in front of him.

He waited until he could no longer hear the voices or the footsteps of his friends. Nobody had seen him leave. It was time to get started.

He took out the postcard with the view of Paris and went over to the sink. He ran a paper towel under the tap, then wiped it over the picture. The Eiffel Tower and its surroundings dissolved and disappeared. Underneath, there was an intricately drawn map of the Greenfields Bio Center, showing all the buildings and passageways, with two tiny lights already blinking. One was red. One was green.

They told him where he was and where he had to get to.

He listened for a moment, and when he was sure that there was no one nearby, he slipped out into the corridor again, holding the postcard in front of him. According to the flashing display, the chief science officer—Leonard Straik—could be found in the building next door to this one, but the two of them were connected by a walkway, so Alex wouldn't have to go back outside. All in all, he didn't think he was in too much danger ... at least not yet. He was wearing a school uniform, part of an invited group.

If anyone did run into him, it would be easy enough to claim that he had simply lagged behind and become lost. And anyway, what was there to worry about? The research center might look sinister and it might have poison at its heart, but nobody had suggested it was breaking any laws. He was here simply because one man, Straik, might be a security risk. His job was an easy one. And half an hour from now, it would all be over.

Even so, his nerves were jangling as he made his way forward, the flashing light in the display signaling his progress. He had been heading in the same direction as the school party until he came to an open area where three corridors met with a concrete staircase heading up to the next floor. That was where the light seemed to be directing him. He went up the first few steps, then flattened himself against a wall as he heard footsteps approaching. A man and a woman appeared, both of them wearing white coats, walking down one of the passageways below him. They were deep in conversation and didn't notice him. Alex waited until they were gone, then continued up.

The inside of the building was like a school or university. The walls were mainly whitewashed and bare, with signs pointing toward different blocks. There were no decorations, just fire extinguishers and display boards full of safety notices. The second floor was identical to the ground one, with doorways and interlinking corridors. Without Smithers's postcard, Alex wouldn't have had any idea where to go, but now he allowed it to lead him until he arrived at the glass bridge that led to the next building. It was more dangerous here. The bridge was about thirty feet long, exposed on both sides.

From where he was standing, Alex could see electric vehicles passing each other on the road underneath. A couple of guards walked slowly past, and Alex saw that these two were armed. He recognized the familiar shape of 19mm Micro Uzi sub-machine guns, hanging lazily against their chests, and wondered if the weapons had been kept hidden deliberately when the school party arrived.

To make matters worse, there were also several cameras pointing his way. Alex could wait until there was no one around, but he would still be spotted if he tried to cross the bridge. He opened his bag, took out the pencil case, and found the pocket calculator. Jamming the cameras might well advertise that something was wrong, but he had no choice. He pressed the plus button three times, checked that the road was clear, then crossed the bridge.

He knew he was operating against the clock now. With the cameras down, security inside the complex would be heightened and it would be less easy to explain what he was doing if he was caught. He ran to the next corner, then jerked back as a door opened and a guard appeared, running down a corridor in front of him. It was obvious that Alex had passed from an academic or administrative block into an area reserved for senior management and executives. The floor was suddenly carpeted. There were paintings

—highly detailed watercolors of different plants—on the walls. The lighting was softer and the doors were made of expensive wood. According to the navigation system concealed inside the postcard, Straik's office was nearby, and Alex also knew its number: 225. That was the date that Smithers had written above the message.

He found it at the end of the corridor around the next corner. As he approached, he heard a door open somewhere downstairs and someone calling out. There were more footsteps ... someone hurrying. A telephone was ringing insistently. Nobody was answering it. They were only tiny details, yet Alex had the sense that something had changed inside Greenfields. The cameras were out of action, and that had made them nervous.

Was there anyone in Straik's office? There was only one way to find out. Alex took a deep breath and knocked. This was the moment of truth. If someone called out for him to come in, the whole thing would have been a waste of time.

There was silence.

Alex sighed. So far, so good. He took out the pencil case and removed the library card. He had noticed a card reader built into the wall beside every door that he had passed, and Straik's was no different.

Alex swiped his card through the reader, then fed it into the slot at the bottom of his pencil case. He felt the whole thing vibrate in his hand as the machinery that Smithers had built into the secret compartment did its work. A few seconds later, the library card slid out again. Alex swiped it a second time. The card had been reprogrammed. There was a click and Straik's door swung open.

Alex hurried in, closing the door behind him. He found himself in a large, comfortable office with views over the perfect lawn outside the security block. That was where they had gathered when they had first arrived, and for a fleeting moment Alex wondered if he had been missed yet. Had Tom been

able to cover for him during the second roll call? He began to realize just how risky his plan had been—but it was too late now. He looked around him. Straik had four or five potted plants, which seemed to have been genetically modified to look artificial. There were half a dozen bookshelves, an antique mirror, and a glass-fronted cabinet with a scattering of scientific awards. A framed picture had recently been delivered but not yet hung. It was still in Bubble Wrap, leaning against the wall. Two designer armchairs sat side by side, opposite an antique desk. Straik's computer was on the desk.

Alex made straight for it. He just wanted to get this over with and then join his friends. Once he was back with the school group, he would be safe. Even if the security people realized there was an intruder at large, they would never suspect him. He had to admit that Alan Blunt was right. Sometimes it did help to be fourteen.

Straik had a leather chair, a massive, swiveling thing that reminded Alex of the dentist. He sat down and took out the eraser that had come with the pencil case. Some of the gadgets that Smithers had supplied him with over the past year had been ingenious, but this one was very simple. He simply ripped the eraser in half, then pulled it apart to reveal the memory stick inside.

Straik's computer was already turned on, but Alex had no doubt that any important files would be encrypted and protected by a whole series of passwords. Fortunately, that wasn't his problem. Alex found the USB port. There was already a memory stick there and he took it out, laying it on the desk.

Then he plugged in his own.

Immediately, the screen blazed into life with four columns of figures flickering and spinning crazily as the worm—or whatever was built into the memory stick—burrowed into the heart of the computer, sucking out its information. How long had Smithers said this would take? Alex thought he heard voices outside in the corridor, and he felt the cold touch of the air-conditioning against the sweat on his neck and brow. Half a minute. That was all. But the seconds seemed to stretch themselves in front of him as more and more files—thousands of them—appeared and disappeared, each one duplicated and stolen away.

57.2 GB downloaded of 85.3.

Alex forced his eyes away from the screen and looked at the desk, wondering what other secrets the director of Greenfields might have left scattered around. But there was nothing out of the ordinary: a diary with a few scribbled entries, some letters waiting to be signed. He glanced at them, but they were brief and uninteresting.

66.5 GB downloaded of 85.3.

He slid open one of the drawers. It held stationery—envelopes and headed notepaper, business cards, and a telephone directory. Two notebooks, both of them empty. He turned back to the screen. Only twenty gigabytes to go, but infuriatingly, the computer seemed to have slowed down as whatever worms were hidden on the memory stick burrowed their way through the various firewalls. Even so, he wouldn't have time to go through the files. Most of them would make no sense to him anyway, and it would be impossible to tell which were important and which were simply routine.

71.1 GB downloaded of 85.3.

Alex knew that he was running out of time, that someone could arrive at any moment. Part of him was

listening for footsteps in the corridor.

79.5 GB downloaded of 85.3.

The memory stick had almost done its work. But now someone really was approaching! Alex could hear two men talking, getting closer all the time.

On the screen, the horizontal bar came to the end of its journey.

Download complete.

The memory stick had finished its work. The computer screen went blank. There was a faint bleep as the lock was activated. Alex snatched the memory stick and dived forward, making for the one hiding place he had seen inside the office. Already he was wondering what he would do if Straik decided to spend the whole day in his office. How would he get back to the school group? He would be trapped.

Alex had just managed to conceal himself when the door opened.

Two men came in.

From where Alex was crouching, he could see Leonard Straik as he approached the desk. The Greenfields director was reflected in the mirror, and with a sense of total shock, Alex realized that he recognized him. Silver hair rising up as if it had just been blown dry. Heavy lips and jowels. Small, watery eyes. The two of them had met recently. But where ... ?

Then he remembered. Scotland. New Year's Eve. The man he had thought of as an accountant, playing cards with Desmond McCain. What had McCain called him? Leo. Of course! That was it. Leo was Leonard ... Leonard Straik.

“Do you want something to drink? Tea? Coffee? We actually develop it ourselves, you know. But it still tastes disgusting.”

“No. Not for me, thank you.”

The other man came in, closing the door behind him. And that was an even bigger shock for Alex.

The second man was Desmond McCain.

Chapter 11: CONDITION RED

“SO, IS IT READY FOR SHIPMENT?”

Alex remembered McCain’s voice so well: not loud but deep and powerful, brimming with self-confidence. And yet he had difficulty pronouncing his words. His smashed jaw wasn’t quite able to form them perfectly. He had taken one of the designer chairs and was sitting with his back to Alex, the silver crucifix in his ear just visible above his right shoulder. Meanwhile, Straik had taken his place on the other side of the desk. The two men had no idea that anyone else was in the room.

It was fortunate that Straik liked big paintings. Whatever it was that he had bought for his office had provided Alex with his hiding place. He was squashed up behind it, in the awkward, triangular space between the picture and the wall. There certainly wouldn’t have been room for a full-grown adult here, and even he was cramped, the muscles in his thighs and shoulders already urging him to straighten up.

He could make out a little of Straik and McCain reflected in the antique mirror, but he didn’t dare lean too far forward. If he could see them, they would be able to see him.

“Of course it’s ready,” Straik replied. He sounded irritated. “I gave you my word, didn’t I?”

“So where is it now?”

“The bulk of it is at Gatwick Airport. It’s being carried out in a commercial Boeing 757. Completely routine. But I thought it might amuse you to have a look at it, so I’ve kept a sample for you here.”

Straik slid open one of the drawers of his desk and took something out. Alex craned forward, but he couldn’t see what it was. “It took a little while longer than expected. We had problems with mass production.”

“How much were you able to produce?” McCain asked.

“A thousand gallons. It should be more than enough. The main thing is to make sure that the temperature is kept constant when it’s in the air. You have to remember, this stuff is alive. But that said, it’s also fairly durable.”

“How quickly will it work?”

“Almost immediately. You need to apply it in the morning. The process will begin at once, and within thirty-six hours it’ll be unstoppable. There won’t be anything to see, of course—not to begin with—but in about three weeks you’ll have the attention of the entire world.” Straik paused. “What about the shooting? All done?”

“I’m sending Myra to Elm’s Cross tomorrow. We’re closing it down.”

“Getting rid of the evidence.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, in that case ...”

Straik stopped. And in the silence, somehow Alex knew that something had gone wrong. Crouching behind the picture, he froze, afraid that the sound of his breathing or his heart beating would give him away.

“Someone has been in my office,” Straik said.

“What?” The word came out like a whiplash.

“My desk ...” Straik picked something up, and even without seeing it, Alex knew what it was. The memory stick that had been in the computer when he arrived. He had taken it out to insert his own—but he hadn’t had time to replace it. “This was in my USB port when I came down to meet you,” Straik said. “I loaded it myself. Someone’s taken it out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“Your secretary could have been in.”

“She’s not here.”

Alex realized he couldn’t hold his position much longer. He was desperate to straighten up, to allow his muscles to stretch. At least there was one good thing. The hiding place was so small that neither of the two men would suspect for a minute that anyone else was still in the room. But he had to know what was going on, even at the risk of giving himself away. Very slowly, he leaned forward a few inches to have a glimpse in the mirror. McCain was holding the memory stick. Straik was hunched over his computer, tapping furiously at the keyboard, his little eyes focused on the screen. Two pin-pricks of red had appeared in his cheeks.

“This computer has been compromised,” he announced.

“Compromised?”

“Someone has attempted to download documents and files from the main drive. For all I know, they may have succeeded.” Straik snatched up a telephone and dialed a number. There was a brief pause.

Then he was answered. “This is Leonard Straik,” he said. “I want an immediate status report.” Another pause. Alex wondered what was being said at the other end of the line. It wasn’t hard to guess. Then Straik spoke again. “I want you to put out a condition double red alert,” he snapped. “All personnel to assemble immediately. This is not an exercise. We have a major security breach.”

He hung up. “We have an intruder,” he said to McCain. “Ten minutes ago, our entire surveillance system went down. Someone must be jamming the signal. This is what they were after.” He nodded at the computer. “They must have left seconds before we arrived.”

“What’s a double red alert?”

“Any unauthorized person found wandering inside the Bio Center will be killed ... no questions asked.”

“Don’t you have a bunch of schoolchildren here?”

“I haven’t forgotten that, Desmond. I’m not an idiot—whatever you may think. My staff have special instructions.” He turned off the computer. “I’m going to the control center. Are you coming?”

“Absolutely.” It struck Alex that McCain sounded more amused than alarmed. But that seemed to be his character. Whatever he might be up to, he didn’t believe that anyone could get in his way.

The two of them stood up. Alex heard the swish of cloth as Straik came out from behind his desk. They went over to the door. It opened, then closed. Alex was on his own.

Gratefully, he uncurled himself from behind the picture. For a moment he stood where he was, trying to collect his thoughts. He was probably safe while he was in Straik’s office, at least for the time being.

Security would be searching for him—but this was the one place they wouldn’t look. Even so, he couldn’t stay here forever. With an intruder on the loose, the school visit might be cut short and the bus sent back to London. Alex had to be on it. He couldn’t be left behind.

It was worse than that. Alex realized that his only chance of survival was to get back to Mr. Gilbert and the others. There had been nothing accidental about the death of the whistle-blower, and no matter what Blunt might have said, there really was something seriously unpleasant going on at Greenfields. Why else would the director be so keen to see that any intruder was killed? Alex had to get back to his class.

No guard was going to fire at him when there were witnesses. Once he was back with the others, he would be safe ... just one bored student among many.

He headed for the door, about to leave, when he noticed a glass vial resting on Straik’s desk. It was a test tube, sealed at the top, with a muddy gray liquid inside. This must be the “sample” that he had heard the two men talking about. Alex had no idea what it contained, but another thousand gallons of it were on their way somewhere abroad. He still had the memory stick in his pocket, but on an impulse he went over and took the test tube too. Smithers would analyze it. And that would be the end of it. The liquid would surely reveal whatever was being planned.

He opened the door carefully, checked there was no one in sight, then stepped outside. He had decided to head back the way he had come. He had no idea where his friends were and he was furious that he had no way of communicating with them. Normally, he would have called Tom or James ... but all their mobile phones had been left on the bus. What had the woman, Dr. Beckett, told them? The laboratories first. Then the greenhouses and storage centers. Finally, the lecture theater. Surely they couldn’t be too hard to find.

Alex closed the door behind him and sprinted back around the corner, his feet making no sound on the carpet. The glass bridge was ahead of him, but even as he approached it, he heard men running toward him and spun back, ducking into a storage cupboard a second before they appeared. There were three guards and they were all armed. Alex watched them run across the bridge and disappear down another passage. Above his head, he noticed a light flashing red. He gritted his teeth. This had turned into a cat-and-mouse game with only one mouse and an awful lot of cats.

The bridge was clear and he crossed it into what he had thought of as the administrative block. He went back down the stairs but immediately realized that he had forgotten which way he had originally

come from—left or right. The trouble was that every direction looked the same. He tossed a mental coin and set off, knowing almost at once that he was lost. He still had the postcard with its guidance system in his back pocket but it couldn't really help him now. All that mattered was to keep moving and not to be seen.

“Stop!”

The guard had stepped out of nowhere, blocking his way. He had a machine gun dangling around his neck and he was already fumbling with it, bringing it up and around. Alex turned and ran. He had taken no more than ten steps when a neon light fitting exploded with a shower of sparks and broken glass. At the same time, the walls and ceiling showered plaster on him. Alex hadn't heard much more than a whisper, but the guard was clearly firing in his direction, the bullets streaming over his head. The gun must have some sort of silencer attached to it ... and of course, that made sense. These were the

“special instructions” that Straik had issued. They couldn't risk the sound of gunfire, not when they had forty schoolkids on the site.

Alex hurtled down another corridor, past a series of open doors. He passed a laboratory, surprisingly cluttered and old-fashioned, with plant specimens on the work desks and bottles of different chemicals on the shelves. A woman in a white coat, holding a petri dish in the palm of her hand, looked up and momentarily caught his eye. Behind her, a man was taking a tray of flowers out of what looked like an industrial fridge. Alex wondered if his class had been here, perhaps a few minutes before. He was tempted to stop and ask. He could still pretend to be lost. He decided against it.

Double red alert. He had so far been spotted by one guard, and the fact that he was a boy in a school uniform hadn't made any difference at all. These people wanted him dead.

He heard shouting behind him. There was another light flashing in the corner of his eye. Alex hadn't even slowed down. He saw a glass door ahead of him and sprinted toward it, palms outstretched, praying that it wasn't locked. He pushed. It opened. He almost fell through as another blast of bullets fanned silently through the air, punching dotted lines across the wall beside him. But now he was outside and running. He saw the sleek white exterior of the lecture theater on the other side of the lawn, but he couldn't reach it. More guards in electric vehicles were racing toward him, moving fast. Alex felt a surge of despair. How could he have allowed Alan Blunt and MI6 to talk him into this? He'd promised Jack he wouldn't get into trouble again. He'd promised Sabina. More than that, he'd promised himself.

Anger spurred him on. He reached one of the greenhouses and plunged in through two sets of doors. It had been cold outside, but here the climate was subtropical. Hundreds of plants were arranged on shelves, some just a few inches tall, some bending against the roof high above. The greenhouses were actually more like glass factories, divided into dozens of different rooms, each one joined to the other by a maze of interlinking corridors. Huge silver pipes and watering systems snaked across the ceiling. There were banks of machinery controlling the lights, the temperature, and the humidity in all the different areas, ensuring perfect conditions for all this artificial life. Alex had to be safe here. The guards might have followed him in, but there were plenty of hiding places. Provided he kept moving,

there was no way they would be able to find him.

The next attack took him completely by surprise. A cascade of bullets that seemed never-ending. They came from all sides, determined to kill the intruder even if it meant destroying the entire complex. Alex didn't hear a single shot, but inside the greenhouse the noise of bullets smashing glass was deafening.

Windows shattered all around him. Alex threw himself to the ground as shards of glass, thousands and thousands of them, showered in all directions. Inches above his head, the plants were shredded, the very air turning green as it was filled with tiny cuttings of stalk and leaf. Terracotta pots exploded, earth showering out. Brightly colored flowers tore themselves apart. And still the bullets kept coming, hammering into the machinery, ricocheting off the metal pipes. Alex could just make out the dark shapes of the guards surrounding the building, destroying it. He wondered if they had all gone mad. Or was it that the work at Greenfields was finished and nothing mattered anymore, so long as nobody was able to escape with its secrets?

He scurried forward on his hands and knees, trying to lose himself farther inside the complex. He came to a brick wall with another bank of machinery and crawled behind it, putting a solid barrier between himself and the gunfire. Nobody could see him here. He patted his fingers against his forehead. When he examined them, they were stained with blood. None of the bullets had hit him. It must have been the falling glass. He brushed it out of his hair and off his shoulders. What must he look like? What would Mr. Gilbert say if he ever turned up?

He had to find the school tour! Surely they must have heard all the racket, even if the guards were using silencers. Another corridor led into the distance, this one with mirrored tiles instead of glass. He set off, still keeping low. Suddenly he was surrounded by brickwork. He had entered some sort of equipment room with spades and wheelbarrows. He could have been in an ordinary garden center rather than a top-secret research institute. There were even bags of fertilizer ... as if he needed reminding of the sort of trouble he was in.

Somehow he had to find a way back outside. Then he would cut back to the lecture theater and hope to join the rest of Brookland there. At least he seemed to have lost the guards with their machine guns.

Perhaps they were scouring through the wreckage, looking for a body. Alex checked the test tube that he had stolen from Straik's office. He had been carrying it in his top jacket pocket, and fortunately it was still in one piece. He slipped it back in and set off again, heading for a set of solid-looking doors and a sign: STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. The doors were locked and hermetically sealed, but there was another reader set in the frame. Alex still had the library card. He had reprogrammed it to open Straik's door, and presumably Straik had access to every zone in the Bio Center. So ...

He tried it. It worked. The doors opened. Alex went in, smiling as they clicked shut behind him. It might well be that the guards were unable to follow him in here. How many of them, after all, would have been authorized?

He only realized where he was when it was too late. The shape of the building, the intense heat, the moisture running down the glass panes ... all these should have warned him. But the door had already

locked itself, and looking back, he saw that there was no reader on this side, no way back out. He stood where he was, feeling the heavy air on his cheeks and forehead. His clothes were already sticking to him. Something was buzzing loudly over his head. Alex closed his eyes and swore.

He had walked into the Poison Dome.

Chapter 12: HELL ON EARTH

ALEX LOOKED AROUND HIM. He had once visited the greenhouses at Kew Gardens in London—and in some ways this was similar. The building itself was very elegant, the great dome supported by a delicate framework of metal supports. The whole area was about the size of a circular soccer field, if such a thing could exist. But unlike Kew Gardens, there was nothing beautiful or inviting about the plants that grew here. Alex examined the tangle of green in front of him, the trunks and branches crisscrossing each other, struggling for space. They all looked evil, the leaves either razor sharp or covered in millions of hairs. He remembered what Beckett had said. These were mutant organisms.

Touching just one of them would bring pain and death. Fruits in the shape of half-sized apples hung over his head, and rich, fat berries clung to the bushes. But they were all hideous colors, somehow unnatural, warning him to stay away. He could hear droning. There were insects in here and they were big ones, from the sound of them. Bees, perhaps something worse.

Alex's skin was already crawling, but he forced himself not to move. The information that the Beckett woman had given him when he arrived might even now save his life. He mustn't brush against any of the plants here. They had been altered so that they were a hundred times more deadly than nature intended. And there weren't just plants. She had talked about the interaction of poisons. And so there were spiders and snails and ... of course, the bees. Why had Straik created this place? Hell on earth.

What was he trying to prove?

Alex couldn't go back. He remembered the shape of the dome, with the corridors branching out like points of the compass. He had come in as if from the south. Now he had to reach the other side and one of the other three exits. Two in and two out ... that must be how it worked. From what he could remember, the lecture theater must be directly in front of him. So all he had to do was walk straight.

And at least there was a path, a boardwalk made of wooden planks, stretched out ahead. And nobody would be looking for him in here. Nobody would be stupid enough to follow him in. He might be stung, bitten, poisoned, or scared to death, but at least he wouldn't be shot.

So ...

There was no other way.

Alex moved forward, very slowly. Touching nothing. Not making a sound. If he was going to get out of here alive, he would have to take it literally one step at a time. Beckett had mentioned snakes ... the taipan. Alex knew it to be the most venomous land snake in the world, fifty times more toxic than the cobra. But it was also nervous. Like most animals, it wouldn't attack a human unless it was threatened.

So provided he didn't brush against anything, touch anything, step on anything, or alarm anything, he might come out of this all right.

One step at a time.

He followed the wooden boardwalk. The plants were horribly close to him. The nearest of them was

an oversized thistle that seemed to be straining to break free and attack him, like an angry dog. Then came a squat, ugly tree corkscrewing out of the earth with green scalpel blades instead of leaves. The smell of sulfur rose in his nostrils. The path was crossing a volcanic pool. A creeper hung in front of him. He resisted the urge to brush it aside and bent low, contorting himself to avoid coming into contact with it.

If he made one miscalculation, even so much as an inch, he might dislodge something, and he knew that a single touch could finish him. Everything here was his enemy. Something buzzed close to his head and he jerked around, unable to control himself. His sleeve brushed against a jagged-edged nettle, but fortunately, the material protected him from the bristling hairs—or neurotransmitters, as Beckett had called them. Alex shrunk into his jacket, pulling it around him. Every fiber of his being was concentrated on the way ahead.

Something slithered onto his foot.

Alex stopped. He even stopped breathing. It was as if someone had drawn a noose tight around his throat. Trying not to panic, he looked down. He could already tell from the weight that this wasn't a snake. It was too small, too light. And it hadn't slithered, it had crawled. For a moment he couldn't see it and thought that perhaps, after all, he had imagined it.

He hadn't. It was almost worse than a snake. A glistening centipede, at least eight inches long, had settled on the top of his sneaker. The creature could have been drawn by a demonic child: red head, black body, bright yellow legs that seemed to be writhing with anticipation. Alex knew what it was. He had seen something exactly the same once on television. The giant redheaded centipede. Also known as the giant desert centipede. How had the narrator described it? Unusually aggressive and extremely fast .

..

And this one had decided to stretch itself out on his foot. What if it decided to explore a little farther, over his ankle and up his pant leg, for example? Alex stood as still as a statue. Without making any sound, he was screaming at the insect. *Go away! Go and explore a sulfur pit. Make friends with a marbled cone snail. But leave me alone!* Alex could see its antennae twitching as it made up its mind.

He looked fearfully at his bare flesh just inches above his sock. He couldn't bear it any more. He suddenly lashed out, using every muscle in his leg as he kicked at the air. He thought the centipede would still cling on. It might get tangled in his laces. He was certain he was going to feel its bite. But when he looked down again, it was no longer there. He had managed to shake it free.

He needed a weapon ... anything to protect himself from whatever might come next. Why couldn't Smithers have built a flamethrower into his Simpsons pencil case? Alex reached into his backpack once again. He had the two gel pens, but the last thing he wanted to do in here was set off an explosion ... it would just advertise his presence to every living thing. That just left the pencil sharpener with the diamond-edged blade. He took it out and unfolded it three times, the plastic swiveling on concealed hinges. He was left with something that looked like a tiny ax or meat cleaver, barely three centimeters long. It might be useful for cutting through wire or even glass, but it wasn't

much good for anything else. Even so, Alex felt a little more confident having it in his hand.

Where was the other door? The guards must still be looking for him, and he knew he had to get a move on, to find his way out of here as quickly as possible. But even so, he didn't dare hurry. He took another step and his foot came down on a little cluster of mushrooms, crushing them. Pale yellow liquid, like pus, oozed out from beneath his sole. A moth fluttered briefly in front of him. It was hard to believe that he was in an artificially created environment, a greenhouse—and not lost in the jungle. The pathway took him past a pool of boiling mud, bubbles rising slowly and heavily to the surface. A tall, twisted tree with lianas trailing from its branches grew beside it. Alex looked up, then ducked back as a globule of milky white syrup splashed down, oozing out of the bark. It missed his face by millimeters and he knew that if it had hit his eyes, he might well have been blinded.

The path curved around and Alex found himself in a slight clearing with a tiny river in front of him and a Japanese-style bridge. The pretty humpbacked structure looked ridiculous in this artificial jungle.

Who could possibly want to come for a walk here among so much death? He could no longer see the glass windows that made up the outer walls of the Poison Dome and guessed that he must be at its very heart. Well, at least if he was halfway in, that meant he was also halfway out. Something buzzed past his head and he just caught sight of a giant wasp, legs trailing, barely able to stay in the air as it struggled against its own weight. What horrors were going to come next? He had to get out of here.

He crossed the bridge, still moving slowly. Silvery water flowed beneath, and as Alex passed across, it suddenly erupted in a frenzy. Some sort of fish life had detected his presence. Piranha ... or something worse. Alex was beginning to wonder if the dome had really been built as a scientific experiment or if it wasn't just some huge toy, the fantasy of a sick mind. Straik might pretend to be studying poisons. In fact, he seemed more interested in sudden death.

He stepped off the other side of the bridge. That was when the man appeared.

It was a guard—or a gardener—dressed in a white protective suit that began at his ankles and continued all the way to his neck. His feet were weighed down by heavy-duty boots and he was wearing gloves that doubled the size of his hands. His head was completely enclosed in the sort of helmet that a beekeeper might wear, except that instead of a net, his face was covered by a plastic sheet. Alex was aware of two hostile eyes glaring at him, a small nose, and a mouth curled in a sneering smile. The rest of the man's features were hidden. He was holding a machete. He was pointing it directly at Alex.

Alex stopped with the bridge behind him. "Hi," he said. "Are you the park attendant? Because if so, maybe you could show me the way out."

The man tightened his grip on the weapon. Alex knew what was about to happen and he was ready for it. As the machete swung through the air, the blade aiming for his neck, he dropped down, then threw himself forward, ducking underneath the man's arm. For just a second, Alex was behind him and he slashed upward with his own, miniature blade. The man didn't even feel it. He spun around and brought both his hands plunging down, using the handle of the machete as a club. It smashed into Alex's shoulder and the pain ricocheted along his bones and muscles, all the way to his wrist. His hand fell open and the little knife dropped away.

The man came at him again, this time swinging the blade to force Alex away from him. Alex took one step back, then another. At the last second, he remembered the water behind him. The man was about to feed him to the fish. Alex stopped with his heels on the very edge of the bank. The machete sliced the air in front of him and at once he lashed out, his fist plunging into the man's abdomen. The protective suit absorbed much of the damage. Alex felt the hardened material take the skin off his knuckles. But the man had been winded and fell back. Alex lashed out with his foot, catching the man on his arm. The machete spun away and landed, point down, in a flower bed.

The man charged straight at him, almost knocking Alex off his feet. Alex was terrified he was going to step on a nettle or fall backward into one of the flower beds. The flowers growing near the river were like porcupines, with huge spikes and bulging, overripe berries that could have been disease-ridden eyes. For a moment Alex lost his balance and he lifted an arm to steady himself. He touched a spider's web hanging from a branch. He hadn't even seen it, but he felt it at once. A single strand of the web had wrapped itself across the flesh on the back of his hand. It burned into him like acid. Alex cried out.

The man reached for the machete, took hold of it, and suddenly he was coming again at Alex, chopping the air with a series of vicious blows. Alex looked left, right, then behind him. He had almost backed into another tree. The bark looked innocent enough, but he didn't dare touch it. It might contain ricin or botulin or any other toxin that Beckett had forgotten to mention. How far away was it? Alex judged the distance carefully, then stood his ground. The man stumbled toward him. The heavy protective suit he was wearing was slowing him down. The blade slashed toward Alex's neck. At the very last second, Alex ducked and, just as he had hoped, he heard the clunk as it bit into the tree. The man pulled at it, but it was stuck fast. And that was when Alex twisted around and slammed his foot into the man's chest, putting all his strength behind it.

The man, thrown backward, slipped and fell on his back, landing in one of the beds of porcupine flowers. Even now, his suit should have protected him. But he had no way of realizing what Alex had done. Before he had lost it, he had used the little pencil-sharpener knife to make a slit that ran all the way from the man's waist to the back of his neck. There was a gap now that had allowed the spikes to go all the way through. The man screamed. Behind the mask, his eyes bulged and his entire body began to jerk, his legs kicking helplessly. Alex watched in horror as gray foam began to pour out of his mouth.

Then suddenly his arms shot out and he lay still.

Alex didn't stay a moment longer than he had to. The noise of the fight would have disturbed whatever else was living in this nightmare place. If there were any other men working inside the dome, they would be on their way to investigate. He'd had enough. Still forcing himself not to panic, he pressed forward. A few minutes later, he was finally rewarded—a door! This one opened from the inside. Alex felt a great wave of relief as he swiped the card and passed through. The door swung shut. He had left the Poison Dome behind.

He examined the back of his hand. The web had left a white line running from one side to the other and the whole thing was swollen and painful. Well, he just had to be grateful that he hadn't actually met the spider. He rubbed the wound, but that only made it feel worse. He would just have to ignore it

until he could get medical help. Where was he? The dome had brought him into another greenhouse, this one filled with troughs of what looked like wheat. He wasn't safe yet, but at least he was away from the shooting. Maybe the guards thought he was already dead.

He found a door and made his way outside again. In the distance he could hear shouting and two electric vehicles shot past, carrying more guards toward the noise. The lecture theater—white and modern—was right in front of him. Alex didn't know if the cameras were still jammed, nor did he care anymore. He was tired. His hand was hurting. His shoulder—where he had been hit with the handle of the machete—was on fire. There was still broken glass in his hair and he knew there must be quite a few cuts on his forehead and face. The next time Mr. Gilbert offered him a school trip, he would say he was sick.

He staggered forward, heading for the lecture theater. Maybe the rest of the school would already be there. He would slip in without being noticed and join the rest of the group. He could already see himself dozing off during the rest of whatever talk was going on.

Then the doors opened. Two guards stepped out. They saw Alex at the same moment that he saw them.

It wasn't over yet.

Alex turned around and ran.

Chapter 13: EXIT STRATEGY

TOM HARRIS WAS GETTING WORRIED.

Almost an hour had passed since Alex had slipped away, disappearing into a restroom like some superhero about to change into costume and save the world. Only it wasn't like that. Tom knew that Alex didn't really want to work for MI6. He had said as much when the two of them were out together in Italy. So why had Alex chosen to go back to it all—and what could be such a big deal about a research center that seemed to be spending most of its time designing the perfect tomato?

After Alex had gone, the rest of the school party had been taken to one of the laboratories, where an earnest young scientist with a neatly trimmed beard had shown them the chemical process that put new DNA into a single plant cell. Tom had barely listened. He didn't find it easy to concentrate at the best of times. Now, his parents had recently separated. His father was living on his own in a motel in south London. His mother had taken up smoking again. They were both overachievers with a pile of diplomas between them, but what good had it done them? If Tom had his way, he would drop school entirely.

As they had moved from one laboratory to the next, Tom had passed a window and had found himself looking for Alex. There was nobody in sight. But during the next demonstration—something to do with plants freeze-dried in liquid nitrogen—he had noticed a red light begin to blink discreetly in the corner of the room. Beckett had clearly seen it too. Tom saw her face change, a look of concern creeping into her eyes. It was an alarm. He was sure of it.

And then, in the distance, he heard something. The sound of breaking glass—a lot of it. Everyone else was too busy listening, taking notes. But Tom knew what it meant. Alex was on the run. Part of him was tempted to sneak out and join him.

It was lucky he didn't. As soon as the demonstration ended, Beckett insisted on a roll call to check that everyone was there, and—as promised—Tom stood in for Alex, doing a reasonable imitation of his voice.

“Rider?”

“Here, sir.”

Only James Hale, standing next to him, saw what was happening and glanced at him quizzically. Tom shrugged but gave nothing away.

And now they were in some workshop, two floors down, underground. Tom wondered if they had been brought here on purpose, to stop them from hearing or seeing anything that might be going on outside.

Another scientist—this one young, female, and Chinese—had arrived to show them the famous gene gun, developed, they were told, by the director of Greenfields. It was a rather ordinary-looking piece of equipment that resembled a small metal safe with a glass door. Nonetheless, this was at the heart of GM

technology, the woman said. She opened the door and placed a round petri dish inside.

“The gene gun is a very effective way to deliver new DNA into a plant,” she explained. “This is done by a system known as Biolistic Particle Delivery ...”

As she continued, Tom noticed a guard, dressed in khaki, steal into the room. He approached Beckett and whispered urgently into her ear. Tom wasn't surprised when, a moment later, she stepped forward, interrupting the talk.

“I am very sorry, boys and girls,” she exclaimed. “I am afraid we are going to have to end your visit to Greenfields. An emergency situation has arisen and you must return to your school bus at once.”

“Wait a minute ... ,” Mr. Gilbert began. His face was indignant. They had driven a long way to visit the center and they had only been here for an hour.

“There will be no argument,” Beckett snapped. “We will take the back staircase. Your driver has been instructed to meet you around the side of the building.”

James moved closer to Tom. “This is about Alex, isn't it,” he muttered.

“Alex is standing right next to me,” Tom replied.

“Yeah. Sure.” James nodded slowly.

The class was already filing out and the two of them followed behind.

The guards had seen him. If they had been carrying Uzis, he would have been dead already. One of them was coming after him, catching up fast. The other had stopped to talk into his radio, alerting the others.

Alex was getting tired. He was in pain. As he ran back toward the center of the complex, he was aware of just two things. He had to drop out of sight. And—if it wasn't too late already—he had to find his way back to his friends. There was safety in numbers. So long as he was part of Brookland School, inside the group, there was nothing that Straik or anybody else could do.

But where were they? There was no bus, no sign of anyone, and definitely no way out of the Greenfields Bio Center. The fence was too high and he could see the gate, over on his right, firmly closed. The Poison Dome, which he'd managed to break out of just a few moments before, was now on his left. Well, one thing was certain. He wasn't going back in there.

Alex heard a whine and saw an electric car with three more guards speeding across the lawn toward him. The door of one of the brick buildings opened and more guards poured out. These ones were armed. For just a second, Alex was tempted to hand himself over. He could still pretend he had lagged behind his class and gotten lost. Would they really be so quick to kill him?

Then he remembered the test tube in his top pocket. Straik knew someone had hacked into his computer. And there was a dead man in the Poison Dome. Alex put the thought out of his mind. It was obvious what they could—and would—do if they got hold of him, and right now they were just seconds away. He had to move ... fast.

Ahead of him, a wide tarmac driveway ran straight between what looked like two rows of factories.

This was the only way with no guards ... and it might lead him back to the block where the school visit had begun. A single white-coated technician stood in his way, but he was busy with other things, funneling a steaming liquid from a steel cylinder into a heavily insulated container. Liquid nitrogen. It had to be. Alex had seen the same stuff—though in smaller quantities—at Brookland. And what were its properties? In physics class ... yes ... there was something he had been told.

The electric car was getting nearer. The guards who were on foot had brought up their machine guns, preparing to fire. A single cascade of silent bullets and he would be torn to shreds. Alex was already sprinting down the driveway. As the stunned technician stood frozen in surprise, Alex leapt forward and seized the steel cylinder. Then, in a single movement—he spun around and hurled it behind him. The container hit the tarmac and the liquid nitrogen splashed out, immediately forming itself into marbles that bounced along the hard surface. At the same time, it began to evaporate, and suddenly there was a wall of white mist between Alex and his pursuers as the liquid reacted to the higher temperature and turned back into gas. The car swerved as for just a moment Alex disappeared from view. The technician was shouting, but Alex ignored him.

He raced over to the nearest door, using the library card to swipe his way in. He hoped the guards would be unaware that he could open any lock and would keep running. His eyes were watering and he could taste nitrogen gas at the back of his throat. If he had thrown the liquid in a closed room, he would have killed himself, suffocating as the oxygen was swallowed up. Now he found himself in a bare industrial building with cinder-block walls and cement floors. A series of furnaces stood in front of him, none of them operating. A metal staircase twisted upward. Alex was disappointed. He had hoped the building might offer more. Somewhere to hide. Some way of escape. Something.

He took the stairs. He would go up to the roof. There was a communication system built into the pocket calculator that Smithers had given him. He would use it to call MI6. With luck, they would respond before it was too late.

The staircase rose six floors. At the top he came to an old-fashioned door with a push bar. Even as he reached it, he heard the main door of the building crash open beneath him and knew that the guards had worked out where he had gone. He had to fight back a growing sense of hopelessness. There really didn't seem to be any way out of this mess. So what now? A fire escape. He would make his way from the roof back down again and find somewhere else to hide.

Alex had crashed through the door, which then slammed shut behind him. He found himself on a wide, flat roof covered with asphalt. A long silver chimney rose about fifty feet into the air, presumably carrying smoke from the furnaces that Alex had seen below. There were two air-conditioning units and a water tank. But that was all. There was no fire escape in sight. The roof had a low brick wall running all the way around the edge. The nearest building looked to be at least ten yards away—too far to jump.

Alex was six stories up with no way to climb down. He was trapped.

He could imagine the guards already climbing the staircase, making their way toward him. Somehow he had to keep them at bay. There were a few pieces of scaffolding left over from building work lying

on the ground beside the water tank. He snatched two of them, ran back to the door, and wedged them against the handle, slanting them into the ground. That would at least buy him a bit of time.

But he was still a sitting target. In a way, he had played right into their hands. They could leave him here all night and then pick him off at their leisure. Where were his friends? Alex ran back to the edge of the building, skidding to a halt beside the parapet. And finally he saw them.

The school bus was parked at the far end of the main driveway. The field trip must have ended early, as students were already loading up. Even as he watched, he saw Tom Harris and James Hale climbing on board, deep in conversation. He heard a couple of girls laughing. It seemed incredible that they could be unaware of what had been going on at Greenfields while they were being shown around. And there were the two teachers—Mr. Gilbert and Miss Barry! Alex tried to get their attention, tried to call out to them, but they were too far away and his voice was hoarse from the nitrogen. He could only watch in despair as the door hissed shut, sealing his friends inside. He twisted around and looked the other way.

The gate was already sliding open. Straik was determined to get rid of the school party as quickly as possible. The best Alex could hope for was one last roll call, perhaps delaying their departure by another few minutes. Then they would be gone. He would be stuck here, on his own.

He sized up the angles. The bus would pass directly underneath him. Could he jump down? No. He was far too high up. Even assuming he timed it properly and landed on the roof, he would break his arms, his legs, and quite possibly his neck. Could he wave at the driver, somehow attracting his attention?

Impossible. He wouldn't be seen at this height and there was nothing he could throw down.

He heard the sound of fists pounding against metal. A single door was all that was between him and the armed guards, wedged shut by two pieces of scaffolding. Desperately, Alex made a circuit of the roof.

There were no fire escapes, no ladders, no ropes, nothing. The bus engine had started. It was about thirty yards away at the end of the driveway. At the other end, the gate was open, with Salisbury Plain in clear view.

A cascade of machine-gun fire sent Alex diving for cover. The noise was deafening and very near. But they weren't shooting at him. Not yet. One of the guards at the top of the stairs had sprayed the door with bullets. Alex actually saw the metal bulging and blistering as it was hammered. It was on the verge of being blown off its hinges.

The chimney ...

Alex was already up and running as the idea took shape in his mind. The chimney was modern and silver, and as far as he could see, its outer casing was fairly thin. He didn't have time to work out the measurements, but surely if it was laid out horizontally, it might reach across to the next rooftop. He could use it as a bridge. And he had the means to bring it down.

Another burst of machine-gun fire. The door shivered in its frame. Feverishly, Alex reached into his backpack and took out the red gel-ink pen that Smithers had given him. Red was more powerful. It would do more damage. That was what Smithers had said. He glanced back at the door. White smoke

was trickling through the cracks around the side. How much longer would it hold? Alex had the pen in his hand. He twisted the cap once then pulled the little plunger to activate it. He felt it click and slammed the pen against the chimney, diving for cover behind one of the air-conditioning units. The pen stayed in place, held magnetically.

The bus had yet to move. The guards were hammering at the door now, using the stocks of their machine guns to finish the job. There was a brief pause and then an explosion, louder than anything that had gone before. Hopefully the bus driver would hear it. He would have to stop and find out what was going on! Alex was crouching with his hands over his ears. He felt the blast sear across his forearms and the top of his head and looked up just in time to see the chimney topple like a felled tree, the metal close to the base grinding in protest as it was torn apart.

It crashed down, but even as it fell, Alex saw that his plan couldn't work. The chimney was too short to reach the building opposite. It had fallen sideways, smashing into the low wall. The wall acted as a fulcrum, tearing the metal skin a second time. The chimney ended up tilting down toward the main driveway. What had been its top end was now about thirty feet above the road.

The door, meanwhile, had finally collapsed, blown off its frame from one last blast of machine-gun fire. Half a dozen men rushed out onto the roof.

The bus was now moving, slowly picking up speed, roaring toward the gate as if desperate to get out of here. In a few seconds, it would pass directly beneath Alex.

One of the guards saw him and shouted. Alex stood where he was. The guard took aim.

As the bus drew closer, Alex sprinted forward, as if determined to throw himself off the side of the building. The guard fired. Bullets skidded across the roof of the building, ripping up the asphalt.

The chimney had been sliced open by the edge of the wall. It had almost broken in half. If it had, it would have fallen down to the road, blocking the bus. But it was being held in place by a small section of the metal skin, resting on the wall and acting like a hinge. Alex dived headfirst into the opening. The chimney was just big enough for him with his backpack still strapped to his shoulders. It was like being inside a slide at a swimming pool. The round silver surface offered no resistance and Alex shot down.

In the end, it was all about timing. If he had hit the road, he would have died. If he had started too soon, he might have missed the bus and been run over by it. But Alex had timed it perfectly. He shot out of what had once been the top of the chimney at the exact moment that the bus passed beneath him. For a brief second, he saw the roof, a yellow blur rushing past. He had only about fifteen feet to fall, but he knew that the impact was going to be painful.

It was worse than he imagined. The breath was smashed out of him. His neck and his spine almost separated. He was sure he had broken several of his ribs. He rolled, spinning toward the edge. If he kept rolling and fell off, he would be left behind after all and it would all have been for nothing.

Alex stretched out his arms and legs, spread-eagling himself, doing everything he could to stay in contact with the roof. He wondered why the driver hadn't stopped, but perhaps he hadn't heard anything above the noise of the engine.

The bus reached the security gate and passed through without slowing down. Then it was outside the complex, accelerating across Salisbury Plain.

Alex stayed where he was, battered and exhausted. He allowed the cold air to wash over him. Every part of him was in pain. Something was trickling against his chest and for a horrible moment he thought he had been shot. But it wasn't blood. The test tube had smashed. Smithers would just have to use whatever liquid he could separate from the fiber of Alex's jacket. Surely there would be enough of it to analyze.

Meanwhile, he couldn't travel all the way back to London on the roof.

Just before they reached the main road, Alex crawled over to the edge and lowered the top half of his body so that he was hanging, upside down, outside the window where he had been sitting. He was lucky. Tom Harris saw him, his eyes widening in disbelief. Alex made a sign with one hand. Tom nodded.

About one minute later, the bus stopped and Tom got out. Alex watched him rush behind a tree and pretend to be sick. He used the opportunity to slide to the edge and lower himself down. He limped over and joined his friend.

“Alex!” Tom looked horrified. “What happened to you?”

“Things didn't quite go as planned.”

“You look awful!”

“Really? I feel great... .”

Tom helped Alex back to the bus. The two of them had to pass Mr. Gilbert, who was sitting in the front seat. Their teacher was even more shocked than Tom had been. He had only seen one boy leave the bus.

So how was it possible for two of them to be returning?

“Rider!” he gasped. “What are you doing out of the bus? What happened to you?”

Alex didn't know what to say. He could only imagine what he must look like.

Tom came to his rescue. “He fell out of the window, sir. It's lucky we stopped.”

“I don't believe a word of it! The windows don't even open—”

“It was the back door.”

“Well ...” The biology teacher was out of his depth. He just wanted to get back to London. “You'll see the principal first thing tomorrow morning,” he snapped. “Now get back to your seat.”

Alex leaned on Tom and hobbled to the back of the bus past forty staring faces. Everyone would be talking about this at school the next day—but this was Alex Rider. Somehow, any strange behavior was to be expected. As for Alex, he still had the flash drive with its precious download and the sample from the test tube as an added bonus. He had completed his part of the bargain and he had come out of it more or less in one piece. And as he hadn't heard a word from Harry Bulman, he

assumed that MI6 had kept their promise too.

He sank back into his seat, reflecting that his part in all this was over. He might never find out what McCain and Straik had been planning—but what did it really matter? It was none of his business and he was just glad that he would never see either of them again.

Desmond McCain was back in Straik's office, and for once it was clear that he had lost his composure.

He was sitting cross-legged, one hand clenching and unclenching on his knee, and the crack that divided the two halves of his head seemed to have somehow widened as the damaged muscles in his jaw attempted to chew over what had happened. Even the silver crucifix earring had lost its shine.

"This intruder must have been in here, in the room, when we were talking," he growled.

"I would think so." Behind his desk, Leonard Straik licked his lips. He was blinking repeatedly.

"But where?" McCain's great white eyes slid slowly around the office. "There! Behind the picture!"

"I hardly think that there's room."

"Where else?" McCain paused, deep in thought. "What did he hear?"

"I don't think he could have heard anything very much, Desmond." Straik faltered. "We were only in here a couple of minutes. It's just lucky I noticed the flash drive."

"So he now has the contents of your computer."

"All the files are encrypted. And even if he manages to break into them, they won't give much away."

"What about the test tube?"

"I don't think that matters either. Of course, it's bad news. He'll have the sample analyzed—but it won't tell him very much. I don't think anyone will be able to guess its significance."

"You don't think." McCain's fist came pounding down on the side of his chair. Straik heard a dull crack. The arm of the chair had been broken in two. "Five years' work and hundreds of thousands of dollars! We're just a few days away from Poison Dawn, and you don't *think* we've been compromised!"

Obviously, this intruder came in here on the back of your blasted school visit. Why did you allow it in the first place?"

"We had no choice. We only rent this facility ... the land and the buildings. We have to do what the government tells us, and they insisted we have a couple of schools in. They insisted we educate schools about GM technology."

"So then it was a government agent who broke in?"

"I don't know, Desmond." Straik took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. "But I don't think it was a coincidence that the cameras malfunctioned when they did."

“Did any of the guards see the intruder?”

“Quite a few of them did. And they’re insisting it was a boy ... a teenager.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all. If it was a child, then the whole thing could have been ... I don’t know ... a prank!”

“He blew up a chimney on the recycling unit. And he killed a guard in the Poison Dome.”

“A teenager? Then who was he? What was he doing here?”

There was a knock at the door and Dr. Beckett came in, her white coat flapping behind her, carrying a file. There was something military about the way she walked, like a soldier delivering news of a defeat.

“I have the photographs,” she announced.

“I thought you said the cameras weren’t working,” McCain said.

“They were jammed for about forty minutes.” Straik took the file. “But they were working when the bus first arrived, and I thought it might be worth our while to examine who exactly came here today.”

McCain went over to the desk. The file that Beckett had brought contained a dozen photographs taken by the camera closest to the main gate. They were grainy, in black and white, but Mr. Gilbert and Miss Barry were clear enough, stepping down from the bus with the rest of the school group following behind. Straik and Beckett were both leaning forward, examining the pictures, when McCain suddenly stabbed down with his finger.

“Him!”

“Who is it, Desmond?”

“Don’t you recognize him, you idiot? I don’t believe it! It’s impossible. But there’s no doubt about it. It’s the boy from Scotland.”

“What boy?” Then Straik realized. “The boy from the card game.”

“Alex Rider.” McCain uttered the name with undisguised hatred. “That was what he called himself.”

“I heard that name on the roll call,” Beckett muttered. “But he never left the group.”

“Somebody must have answered for him,” McCain said. His finger was still pressing down on Alex, as if he could squash him like a bug. “It’s definitely the same boy, and this is the second time he’s crossed my path.”

“I thought we’d dealt with him, Desmond.” Myra Beckett stared at the picture in dismay. “You said he was in the car with that journalist—”

“Evidently, we failed.” McCain twisted away. “Which means that that irritating journalist is still alive as well. This boy is no mere teenager, though. Who is this Alex Rider? Why is he interested in us?”

“We can find out,” Straik muttered.

McCain nodded. “We have contacts. We need to use them. It doesn’t matter how much it costs.

Someone must know something about this boy ... he clearly wasn’t working alone.” McCain took one last look at the photograph. With an effort, he broke free. “We’ll locate him and we’ll bring him back here.”

“And then?”

“And then we’ll find out what he knows.”

Chapter 14: FEELING THE HEAT

HENRY BRAY HAD BEEN THE PRINCIPAL at Brookland for seven years and assistant principal at another school for five years before that. He didn't often find himself lost for words, but right now that was exactly how he felt. Once again, he examined the boy in front of him while he tried to work out how to proceed.

Alex Rider was different from all the other boys at Brookland. He knew that. The unfortunate death of his uncle in a car accident almost a year ago had clearly sent him off the rails. That was understandable.

But Alex had barely been in school since then, missing week after week because of so many different illnesses that in the end (Mr. Bray hadn't told anyone he'd done this) he had actually written to the doctor, suspecting that something might be going on. He had received a short note back. Alex had viral problems. His health was very delicate. The doctor—his name was Blunt—wouldn't be at all surprised if Alex had to miss a lot more school in the future.

Alex didn't look ill now. He looked as if he had been in a fistfight. There were a number of small cuts on his forehead and the side of his cheek, and from the way he was standing, Bray guessed he had hurt his shoulder. He was here because of a report sent in by his biology teacher, Mr. Gilbert. But Alex didn't give any sign of being ashamed or nervous about what might follow. He was just angry.

Mr. Bray sighed. "Alex. You made a very good start in year seven. All your reports said the same. And I am well aware of your personal circumstances. I imagine you were very close to your uncle."

"Yes, sir."

"It doesn't help that you've had a lot of time off school ... all these illnesses. Obviously, I've made allowances for you. But this business yesterday ... frankly, I'm appalled. As I understand it, the bus had an emergency door that you opened, and you managed to fall out. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm amazed you could be so irresponsible. You could have seriously hurt yourself. And there were other young people on the bus too. Didn't you stop to think that you might cause an accident? I can't imagine why you would do such a thoughtless thing." Mr. Bray took off his glasses and laid them on his desk. It was something he always did when he was about to pronounce sentence. "I hate the idea of your missing any more lessons, but I'm afraid I am going to have to make an example of you. You are going to have one day's suspension from school. You are to go home straightaway, and I've written a note for you to take with you."

Half an hour later, Alex crossed the school yard with a sense of injustice burning in him. He had survived poisonous plants and insects, hand-to-hand combat, and machine-gun fire. He had downloaded the contents of Straik's computer and stolen a sample of whatever he was brewing at Greenfields. Jack would have already delivered them to the MI6 offices on Liverpool Street. And what was his reward? To be treated like a naughty schoolboy, sent home with a note.

The first lesson had already begun, and nobody noticed Alex as he made his way out of the gates and down the road toward the bus stop. As he walked, he found himself going over the events of the day before. The appearance of Desmond McCain had completely thrown him. What was the head of an international charity doing in a bio research center in Wiltshire? He was planning something with Leonard Straik. That much was clear. The two of them had talked about shipping a thousand gallons of the liquid—and they had said that it was alive. But what was it and what was it for? The more Alex thought about it, the less sense it made.

McCain had been to prison once in his life, and he had to be heading that way again. Alex was certain now—not that he had ever really doubted it—that his near death in Scotland, along with Sabina and her father, had been no accident. McCain had tried to kill them. He was prepared to do anything to protect himself. MI6 had wanted to investigate Leonard Straik because he might be a security risk. In fact, he was using Greenfields for something much bigger than anyone suspected.

And then Alex remembered something he had overheard while he was in the office. McCain was going to send the Becket woman somewhere the following day—today. A place called Elm's Cross. The name rang a faint bell. Alex continued walking until he arrived at an Internet cafe not far from Brompton Cemetery. The place served disgusting coffee, but it charged only two dollars for half an hour on one of its ancient computers. At least it had broadband.

Alex paid and chose a computer at the very back, away from the window. The owner glanced at him briefly, then returned to a crumpled copy of *The Sun*. Alex Googled *Elm's Cross* and waited for the page to come up on the screen. The results were disappointing. There was a packaging company with that name in Warminster, a restaurant in Bradford, and a film studio in west London that had apparently closed down a year ago. None of them could possibly be connected. Except ...

“ *What about the shooting?* ”

Straik to McCain. When Alex had heard them, he'd automatically assumed that they were talking about guns. But suppose they had actually meant shooting film? Alex looked for more information about the studio. It was on the other side of Hayes, not far from Heathrow Airport. According to an old news report, a raft of British comedies had been shot there after the war, but the increasing noise of aircraft along with the decline in British film production had combined to put it out of business. There was talk of the land being developed ... affordable housing and more office space. The last film that had been shot there was an advertisement for the shopping chain Woolworth's. It seemed appropriate. A few weeks later, Woolworth's had gone bust too.

Alex had made his decision. Jack wouldn't be expecting him, and even if the school had managed to tell her what was happening, she wouldn't be too worried if he took his time turning up. He would have to be careful. He was still in school uniform and that would certainly attract attention, being out on the street in the middle of the day—but he doubted there would be many policemen around, where he was going.

He took the subway from Fulham Broadway and a taxi the rest of the way. Elm's Cross was in a strange derelict area that had somehow been forgotten by the housing estates, the industrial zones, and the soulless strip malls that surrounded it. As Alex paid the taxi driver, there was a sudden roar and he looked up to see the underbelly of a 747 as it lurched out of the sky toward the main runway of

Heathrow. In the distance he could make out the M4 highway, raised up on concrete spurs, injecting London with a never-ending stream of cars and trucks.

The driver looked at him suspiciously. “Shouldn’t you be in school?” he asked.

Alex tipped him generously. “I’m on a school project,” he replied. “We’re writing about air pollution.”

The lie had come easily. Alex could actually taste the exhaust fumes in the air, and he couldn’t imagine what it would be like to live with it, day in and day out. He wondered what he was doing. Less than twenty-four hours ago, he had been congratulating himself on a mission accomplished. MI6 had what they wanted. So why was he here, quite possibly putting his head back in the noose?

He was angry. That was part of the reason. But Alex knew it was more than that. Mr. Bray might have given him the excuse, but there was part of him that needed to investigate, to uncover the answers. That part had been deliberately cultivated by MI6 and his uncle—Ian Rider. Using him wasn’t enough. First, they had turned him into someone who *wanted* to be used.

Alex hoisted his backpack onto his shoulder and set off. He had given the taxi driver an address about a quarter of a mile from his true destination—just in case he had taken it upon himself to call the police and warn them about a boy cutting off from school. He passed through an empty area with what looked like a reservoir on one side and a wide expanse of dirty, litter-strewn grass on the other. A wire fence stretched out ahead of him. Now he had to be careful. Desmond McCain had said he was coming here today. If he happened to drive past, Alex would stick out like a sore thumb, and this time there were no witnesses.

ELM’S CROSS STUDIOS

PRIVATE

WARNING: 24-HOUR SURVEILLANCE

The sign hung on the fence outside the main gate, but Alex wasn’t sure he believed it. How could there be round-the-clock surveillance when there were no cameras? There were no guards in sight either. The paint on the sign had faded, with rust speckling through. And the gate itself was open, inviting him in.

Alex could see a paved driveway leading down to a cluster of buildings, most of them low-rise with long, narrow windows running horizontally, just beneath the roof. They might once have been surrounded by manicured lawns, but the site had become overgrown with long grass and shrubs running rampant. In the middle of it all, there was a row of three hangars, big enough to house planes .

. although they long ago would have ceased to fly. The whole place looked sad and abandoned.

He walked in. If security men appeared, he would just have to bluff it out. With a bit of luck, nobody here would know what had happened the day before. And although the guards at Greenfields had been armed, it was very unlikely that they would be toting guns right next to a major international airport.

Nobody stopped him. There were definitely no cameras. Alex passed a couple of Dumpsters, filled to overflowing. A lot of the contents were household rubbish—old cartons and broken pieces of furniture.

But there were also oddities: a plastic cactus, a swordfish, a scaled-down replica of the Statue of Liberty missing the hand holding the torch. He thought he saw a car parked on the other side of some shrubs and was about to duck out of sight when he realized it was a black saloon BMW, left over from the Second World War, burned out and resting on bricks instead of tires. He was surrounded by the remnants of old films that had been made, seen, and forgotten. Elm's Cross had once been a dream factory, but the machinery had long since shut down.

He came to the first of the hangars, with the words **STUDIO A** stenciled in yellow letters on the corrugated iron wall. The huge sliding doors were open, but there was nothing inside apart from a puddle of oily water and a pile of broken wood. Cables hung down from the ceiling. A pigeon cooed somewhere in the rafters, the sound amplified by the empty space. The second hangar was the same.

Alex was beginning to think he was wasting his time. There was nobody here. And what would someone like Desmond McCain want with an abandoned film studio, anyway? He must have been referring to a different Elm's Cross after all. Alex looked at his watch. Quarter past eleven. Jack would be wondering where he was. He took out his mobile phone, thinking he would call her. There was no signal.

“It's ready, ma'am...”

“Then I'll leave you to it.”

Alex heard the voices and crouched behind a low brick wall—in fact made of painted cardboard and wood, another old piece of film scenery. He had already recognized the voice of Dr. Myra Beckett, and a moment later, there she was, walking out of the third studio dressed in a raincoat, which she had wrapped tightly around her waist. There were two men with her. Alex looked around for anyone else, but it seemed they were alone.

Beckett nodded at the men. “I'll see you back at Greenfields,” she said.

For the first time, Alex noticed a couple of cars parked in the narrow driveway between Studios B and C. Beckett got into one of them and drove off. The two men went back into the studio. What could they possibly be doing there? Alex knew that he'd already been in enough trouble. Jack would kill him if she found out he'd come here. But he couldn't just back out now. He had to know.

Beckett had left. Alex crept over to the studio entrance, fearful that the two men would reemerge at any moment. He peered inside. There was no sign of them, but it seemed that this studio was still in use. He could make out powerful lights on the other side of a huge screen stretched over a metal frame. The screen was a barrier between Alex and whatever was happening, but at least it was dark on this side. He could hear the two men muttering in the distance and knew that, for the moment, he was safe. He slipped inside.

“Some of this stuff must be worth a fortune.”

“You heard what she said. Leave it!”

The two voices carried easily in the enclosed space. Alex made his way along the back of the screen, keeping close to the outer wall. McCain was closing this place down. That is what he had said in Straik's office. Perhaps Mr. Bray had done Alex a favor after all. If he hadn't been suspended, he might never have had the opportunity to find out what was going on.

Then the two men appeared, coming around the side of the screen. But for the darkness, they would have seen Alex at once. Alex slipped behind a pile of boxes, crouching low. The men walked straight past him, so close that he could have reached out and touched them. He watched them disappear the way he had come. Good. Now he was on his own.

The sound of the door slamming shut echoed all around him like a gunshot. Alex twisted around, but he knew already there was nothing he could do. He heard the rattle of a chain being drawn through the handles, followed by the snap of a padlock. The men had finished here. They had left the lights on. But they had locked and bolted the main door. He heard their footsteps as they walked away and, a moment later, the sound of a car engine starting up. He would just have to hope there was another way out.

Alex straightened up, then continued around the side of the screen. And suddenly he was no longer in London, no longer in a grubby industrial area near Heathrow Airport.

He was in Africa.

Alex had never actually been to Africa, yet the scene that surrounded him was unmistakable. He was in the middle of a cluster of mud huts, half a dozen of them, with no windows and roofs made out of straw. They had been constructed close to each other in a dusty enclosure, surrounded by a wooden picket fence. An assortment of clothes, old but brightly colored, hung on a washing line between two stunted acacia trees. To one side, there was a well with a few objects—pots, pans, some tin plates—scattered around it. A shield shaped like a leaf and two wooden spears had been propped up against one of the doorways as if guarding the way in.

It was only when he looked up that the illusion was broken. Electric arc lamps blazed down from a network of catwalks high above. Together, they were creating the heat and light of an African summer's day. The giant screen was actually a cyclorama made out of a bright green fabric. Alex understood enough about film technology to know that a computer could insert anything into the green background. A flick of a switch and the village could be in a jungle, a desert, or beneath a clear blue sky.

But what sort of film was being made? With a shudder, Alex realized that the village was populated —

but not with anything that resembled life. There were three dead cows lying on their sides, their legs rigid, their stomachs bloated, their eyes glassy and empty. They had to be made out of plastic. There was no smell, no flies swarming over them as there would have been out in the wild. But that didn't take away any of the horror. From the look of them, if these animals had been real, they would have died in pain.

They weren't alone. As Alex moved farther into the set, almost drawn in against his will, he saw what had once been a large bird, perhaps an eagle, now a crumpled heap of bone and feathers lying in

the dust. It was only when he reached the edge of the village that he came upon the first human being. A little black boy, maybe two or three years old, was lying curled up, one matchstick arm drawn across his eyes. Alex felt sick. He could tell that it was just a dummy, not a real child. But who would create something like this? And why?

He had seen enough. He could work out the reason for all of this later. Alex just wanted to be back out in the fresh air. He looked around him for a second door and saw one, set in one of the walls of the hangar. He tried it, but it was locked too. There were no windows. He looked up. He could see two barred skylights set in the roof, but there was no way he was going to be able to reach them, even if he climbed up to the lighting platforms. A rectangular air-conditioning shaft ran the full length of the hangar, suspended from the ceiling by a series of metal brackets. He might be able to reach the skylights if he climbed on top of it—but even then, how would he cut his way through the bars?

Perhaps he could blow them up. He still had the second gel-ink pen that Smithers had given him. He was already taking off his backpack when he remembered. He had left the pencil case with the pen and the pocket calculator beside his bed. He checked his mobile. There was no signal. So it looked as if he was just going to have to wait here until someone came back.

And then the whole world burst into flames.

Alex didn't know what was more shocking—the fact that it was so silent, or so unexpected. All around him the ground simply erupted, tongues of fire shooting upward as if powered by hidden pipes below.

Alex could have been in the middle of a minefield. About half a dozen bombs, incendiaries perhaps, were being set off, one by one. Alex was thrown off his feet. He knew that if one of the devices went off directly underneath him, he would be killed. He threw his arm across his eyes, protecting them from the heat.

Now he understood what Beckett and the two men had been doing. Closing this place down meant destroying it. The three of them must have just finished laying the explosive charges when he had come across them. They had been set off either by timer switches or remote control. It made no difference either way to Alex. The flames were roaring all around him. It was as if he had been locked inside some huge oven. He had only minutes to break out of here. Very soon he would begin to suffocate. And if he passed out, that would be the end of him. Everything in here would burn. There would be nothing left.

The green screen had caught alight. Alex saw it dissolve like a huge sheet of paper, turning black and then orange and red as the flames burst through. His eyes were streaming now. It was difficult to see, almost impossible to think. The doors were locked. The skylights were out of reach. The walls were metal. The mobile was dead. He had nothing with him. There was no way out.

The air-conditioning shaft ...

It was a square tunnel hanging underneath the ceiling, plugged into the wall. It brought air into the building. So it had to lead outside. The silver shaft was big enough to crawl through, and Alex thought he could make out an access panel. He wiped a sleeve against his eyes. All the clothes on the washing line were ablaze. One of the huts had vanished, consumed by a whirlpool of fire. Suddenly, all the lights blinked out. The main electric cable must have melted. Now the hangar was an intense red, lit

only by the inferno that was destroying it.

Coughing, forcing himself to suck in the hot air, Alex started forward. Without knowing quite why, he grabbed hold of the shield and carried it over to the ladder. It would make it more difficult to climb, yet somehow he had a feeling he would need it. He reached out and grabbed the first rung. It was already warm. In a minute's time, it would be too hot to hold.

Dragging the shield with him, he climbed up to the walkway. The air-conditioning shaft was directly above him, running about thirty yards to the far wall. He was going to have to climb into it and then crawl the whole distance with the flames roaring underneath him. Alex stared at the distance across the studio with a sense of despair that made him weak. It was going to be like feeding himself into an oven.

If he didn't move fast, he would roast before he reached the other end.

But would there even be a way out? There had to be. There was no other choice.

The access panel to the ventilation shaft was fastened with four nuts and bolts. Alex was lucky. They turned in his hand. But even that wasn't easy. The smoke was blinding him. There was a foul chemical smell—many of the props must have been made of synthetic materials—and even as he dragged at what little air remained, he felt sick. Finally the fourth bolt came free and the panel fell away, bouncing off the walkway and spinning down below. Alex watched it disappear into the fire. There was nothing but fire now. Beckett and her colleagues had done their work all too well.

He pulled himself into the open shaft, sliding the shield in front of him. Now he was glad that he had brought it. Even as he crouched in the square corridor, he could feel the metal underneath him heating up. The shield would at least protect his hands. Quickly, moving with difficulty in the confined space, he tore off his backpack and dropped it ahead of him. Then came his jacket. He folded it under his knees. It would have to provide a cushion against the heat. He was already sweating. He could see the air rippling in front of him. He fixed his eyes on the end of the tunnel. There was a square of daylight, another access panel. That was what he had to reach.

He set off.

He could no longer see the flames, but he could imagine them, stretching out, licking the metal surface directly beneath him. He was shuffling forward as quickly as he could, his hands resting on the shield, his knees on the jacket. But there wasn't enough room to move properly. For just one moment he lost his balance and his palm and five fingers landed on the metal. He winced. The surface was already too hot to touch. He wasn't going to make it. The end was too far away.

Push the shield. Draw in his knees. Push the shield. Draw in his knees.

His head was swimming. There was almost no air left in the tunnel. And the jacket was burning. Most of his weight was on his knees, and he could feel the heat coming through. There was a dull clang behind him and he glanced back to see that the access panel was filled with smoke and the metal was buckling. There was certainly no way back. It occurred to him that the entire shaft could come free, that the brackets holding it up could melt or break loose and that the whole thing could plunge down, smashing into the studio floor and the roaring fire below. But he couldn't let that possibly stop him.

His knees were hurting now and he'd had to move his hands to the very edge of the shield, gripping the sides. It was fortunate that the African shield seemed to be the real thing. If it had been made of plastic, it would already have melted. Alex could hear someone grunting and realized it was him. Every movement was an effort: fighting the heat, fighting to breathe, forcing himself not to give up. He was more than halfway across. He could see the exit—a metal grille—ahead of him. He wouldn't have time to turn any screws, even assuming there were any. What if the grille was welded into place? No. Don't even think it. Alex shuffled faster and faster. Draw in the knees. Push the shield.

The last ten yards were the worst. Alex's vision was blurred. He could feel tears streaming down his face. But then he was there. The grille was in front of him. He reached out and grabbed hold of it, curling his fingers over the metal slats. It wouldn't move. He shook it. Something whispered behind him and he turned around to see a ball of fire rolling in slow motion from the far end toward him. There was only one thing to do. He slid the shield behind him then somehow maneuvered himself so that he was lying on his back. His shoulders screamed at him. The metal was too hot. He could smell his own clothes beginning to burn. He lashed out with both feet, smashing them into the grille.

Nothing.

The fireball was getting closer, floating in space, already halfway down the shaft. He kicked a second time and the grille swung open. Still on his back, Alex drew himself forward, using the balls of his feet.

He hooked his heels over the edge of the wall and somehow spilled out into the open.

He was falling. How high up was he? Had he done all this just to break his neck when he hit the concrete below? But he was lucky. The ground rose up at the back of the studio and he hit soft grass, the slope of the hill. He rolled over several times, then came to a halt. There were flames above him, shooting out of the little square that had just provided him with an exit. Although the metal walls were keeping most of it contained, smoke was seeping through the cracks, rising into the air. Alex heard the glass shatter as the skylights broke and thicker smoke began to billow out. Coughing, wiping his eyes, he got to his feet.

The first fire engines arrived ten minutes later, followed by the police. A pilot coming in to land at Heathrow had seen what was happening and radioed the authorities. By the time the firemen bundled out and began uncoiling their hoses, the whole of Studio C was a raging inferno. Not a single piece of evidence of the filming would remain inside.

The firemen did what they could, but in the end it was easier just to let the building burn. Meanwhile, the police checked the rest of the complex, making sure there was no one else around. None of them had noticed a single schoolboy limping along the main road, looking for a taxi to take him home.

Chapter 15: Q & A

“ALEX RIDER IS AN AGENT working for the Special Operations Division of MI6. I know that’s hard to believe, but I promise you it’s true. He lives in Chelsea, just off the King’s Road, with a housekeeper who acts as his guardian. Her name is Jack Starbright. He has no relatives that I know of.

His uncle, a man named Ian Rider, was also a spy, but he was killed. That was when the kid got recruited.”

Harry Bulman unwrapped a stick of chewing gum, rolled it carefully between his finger and thumb, and slid it into his mouth. He was sitting in a makeshift office that stood on the edge of a building site in London, not far from King’s Cross. There was a cheap desk, three plastic chairs, and a fridge with a kettle and coffee mugs. The walls were covered with architect’s drawings. Outside, work had finished for the day and it looked as if everyone had gone home. There were two men with him. He recognized one of them. Desmond McCain had been in the papers often enough for his face to be familiar. He was dressed entirely in black, one leg crossed over the other, his hands resting in his lap. Bulman could see his own reflection in the brightly polished leather of McCain’s shoe. The other man had been introduced as Leonard Straik. He was older than McCain, with silver hair rising over his forehead. He looked nervous.

Bulman was also neatly dressed. He had put on a suit and tie for this meeting, and his briefcase, with all his notes, was at his feet. But something had gone out of him since he had turned up at Alex’s house.

His confidence and swagger had been replaced by a dull sense of resentment. He was a man who had been injured, and it showed. He talked slowly, measuring his words, and the hatred in his voice was unmistakable. Even the way he chewed the gum had a mechanical quality. He could have been chewing raw flesh.

After he had been released by the police, Bulman had gone home. He had opened a bottle of whisky and drunk half of it, staring at the wall. He had been terrified. In a matter of hours, his entire life had been stripped away from him and—this was the worst part—it could happen again at any time. The man called Crawley had made it absolutely clear. They could just snap their fingers and he would vanish off the face of the earth, spirited away to some mental hospital where he would be left to rot.

They were probably watching him even as he sat there. He wondered if his apartment was bugged.

Almost certainly. For the first time in his life, he sensed how powerless he would be if the system—society, the government, whatever—turned against him. They had given him a warning and it had struck him in the heart.

Harry Bulman was many things, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew that there was going to be no newspaper story about Alex Rider, no front-page headlines, no publishing deal. Even if he dared try again, there wasn’t an editor in town who would go anywhere near him. The Internet? Despite what he had told Alex, he knew there was no point in posting the story in cyberspace. It would do nothing

for him, other than getting him killed.

But what rankled him most wasn't Crawley. It wasn't MI6. It was that he had been defeated by a fourteen-year-old boy. Mr. Alex Bloody Rider. The kid was probably laughing at him.

When the phone had rung a few weeks later and Bulman had heard the voice of one of his contacts, the ex-soldier who had helped him put the story together in the first place, the reporter was tempted to hang up. Fortunately, the man didn't mention Alex Rider. He simply said that something interesting had turned up and he wondered if Bulman would like to meet at the usual place.

The usual place was the Crown pub on Fleet Street. Bulman used his old army training to make sure he wasn't being followed, but he still insisted on walking to a second pub on the other side of town before he said a word. And even then, he chose a back room with the music turned up loud and nobody else in sight.

And that was when he heard that someone else was now asking questions about Alex Rider, and that they were prepared to pay good money for information. It was all being done very discreetly. The friend didn't even know who wanted to know—but the money involved had a lot of zeroes and there was a telephone number he could pass on if Bulman was interested.

Bulman took twenty-four hours to come to a decision. Every instinct told him that Alex Rider had an enemy and that they weren't doing this to buy him a surprise present for his birthday. There was a risk putting himself forward. He could be walking into a trap. But even as he mulled it over, two thoughts stayed in his mind. The first was the money, which he needed. The second was the possibility that he could do Alex serious harm.

In the end he made the call.

He had been passed from one anonymous voice to another. There had been three different people asking him questions before he had finally been told to come here, and he was fairly sure that his own background, everything about him, would have been checked. But the way that it was all being handled reassured him. Whoever these people were, they were afraid of being found out, just like him. And the more careful they were, the safer he would be.

Finally, the date for this meeting had been set. According to the signs on the street, this was the site of a new hostel for the homeless being built by the international charity First Aid. Even so, Bulman was astonished to find himself face-to-face with the Reverend Desmond McCain. Of course he remembered the story of the Parliament member who had gone bad, the building that had burned down and the false insurance claim. He'd heard that McCain had reformed. For the past five years he had been devoting himself to charity projects. Well, obviously he wasn't quite as saintly as people thought. It had already occurred to Bulman that there might be another story in all this, but of course, he kept the thought to himself.

There had been no pleasantries and no introductions. No offers of tea or coffee. After Bulman had sat down, McCain had opened the meeting as if he really were a vicar addressing his congregation.

“I appreciate your coming here today, Mr. Bulman. It is most generous of you. I understand you have information about a boy named Alex Rider. Please would you be good enough to tell me everything you know.”

And Bulman had done just that. Once he had started, he found it all pouring out of him, everything he had learned during his research. It had been difficult to stop.

“They recruited a child!” McCain had listened in silence, but now he turned to Straik. “‘For they are a wicked generation, children who have no faith.’ We should have been warned by the book of Deuteronomy, chapter thirty-two.”

“He’s been incredibly successful,” Bulman said, although it annoyed him to have to admit it. “I have notes on his last three assignments, and there may have been others.”

“You have his address?”

“I’ve actually been to his house. I know where he goes to school. I’ve written it all down for you. I can tell you everything you want to know.” Bulman didn’t want to push his luck, but he couldn’t resist asking a few questions of his own. It was too good an opportunity to miss. He began innocently. “What is this place? You’re building a hostel?”

“It’s a dreadful thing, the number of young homeless people there are in London,” he said—and to Bulman’s surprise, he actually had to brush away a tear. “Out on the streets with no food or shelter!

First Aid was given this land by one of the city’s most prominent developers, and I’m happy to say that we have raised enough cash to build somewhere they can be looked after with food and warm clothes.”

“You do a lot of charity.”

“I have made it my life’s work.”

It was the moment to ask what Bulman really wanted to know. “So why are you interested in Alex, Mr.

McCain?” he continued casually. “I have to tell you, whatever you do with that kid is fine with me. But I would be interested to know—”

“I’m sure you would, Mr. Bulman.” The round white eyes settled on him, and for a moment he shuddered. “You are a journalist, I understand.”

“That’s right.”

“I would hate to think that you might be tempted to write about this meeting today.”

“That depends how much you’re going to pay me.”

“We’ve already agreed on the price,” Straik muttered. “Twenty thousand dollars, in cash.”

Bulman licked his lips. He could taste the mint from the chewing gum. “I agreed to that price before I realized that Mr. McCain was involved,” he said. “But I thought, under the circumstances, that we might renegotiate.”

“I agree with you,” McCain said. “That’s exactly what I’ve decided to do.”

He took out a gun and shot the journalist three times; once in the head, once in the throat, and once in the chest. Bulman’s last gesture was one of surprise. His eyes widened even as his hands flew up and

his body jerked in the chair. Then he slumped back. Blood trickled down from the three bullet holes, spreading across his shirt.

“Was that completely wise?” Straik asked.

“It was unavoidable,” McCain replied. He slipped the gun back into his pocket. “He wasn’t going to keep quiet. He was greedy. A week from now or a year from now, he would have made himself a nuisance.”

“I’m sure. But are we safe?”

“I would doubt very much that he told anyone he was coming here. There’s nothing to connect him with you or me. He was a journalist. Now he’s a dead journalist. Who really cares about the difference?”

“And what about Alex Rider?” Straik got up and went over to the window. He made a signal and a moment later there was the sound of an engine starting up. “We can’t go ahead, Desmond. Poison Dawn is finished.”

“No.” McCain hadn’t raised his voice, but the single word was dark and thunderous. The two of them had known each other for years, but at that moment Straik wondered if he fully understood what went on inside the other man’s head. There was a sort of madness there. He wouldn’t listen to any argument.

“We have been planning this too long,” McCain said. “We’ve spent too much time and too much money. Everything is in place.”

“But if MI6 knows what we’re doing ...”

“They can’t know. It’s impossible.”

“They sent the boy. First to Scotland and then to Greenfields.”

“I’m not so sure.” McCain glanced at Bulman as if he’d forgotten that he’d just shot him and was expecting him to make some comment. “When Alex Rider came to Kilmore Castle, he was a guest of another journalist, Edward Pleasure. There was a teenage girl too. When he came to Greenfields, he was with a school party. It was quite different. I don’t quite know what’s going on here, but it may not be quite as cut and dried as it seems.”

“Even so ...”

McCain held a hand up for silence. “We are not canceling Poison Dawn,” he said. “And certainly not yet. It seems to me that we have to meet with this Alex Rider and have a little talk.”

“You think he’ll just walk in here?”

“I have something else in mind.” McCain stood up. “We are about to make an unimaginable amount of money,” he said. “Two hundred million dollars. Maybe more. But that means we have to take risks.

More than that, we have to make sure that we move one step ahead of the opposition. And that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

He reached forward and grabbed Harry Bulman by the front of his shirt. The journalist had never been a small man, and now he had become, in every sense, a dead weight. Even so, McCain pulled him effortlessly to his feet and dragged him over to the door. Still holding him, he stepped outside. A mechanical digger had started up while he was talking with Straik and it was waiting for him on the other side of the door with its metal arm raised. There was a driver sitting behind the window, smoking.

McCain threw down the body and the driver revved up the engine and trundled forward. There was a crunch of machinery as the arm was lowered and the dead man was picked up. Then the digger reversed, carrying Bulman toward the muddy excavation that would soon be his grave.

McCain watched him go. “Well, it looks as if Mr. Bulman finally got what every journalist wants,” he said.

Straik glanced at him.

“A scoop.”

McCain had made his decision. He set off, avoiding the puddles so that he wouldn’t get his shoes dirty as he made his way toward his car.

“So what exactly do you think is going on?”

Even as Alan Blunt posed the question, a waiter approached his table with the main course: steak and kidney pie for him, a tuna salad for Mrs. Jones. The two of them preferred not to talk as the plates were positioned and the wine was poured. They were having lunch at Blunt’s club, the Mandarin, in Whitehall. And although all the waiters had received security clearance, the two of them preferred not to talk while there was any chance of being overheard. A great many members of the Mandarin were either politicians or intelligence chiefs, and it was said to be the most unfriendly place in London.

Nobody trusted anybody. Members very rarely spoke to each other at all.

That morning, Blunt and his deputy had been given a full briefing by the chief science officer at MI6, a fiercely intelligent woman called Redwing. She had analyzed the liquid that had seeped into Alex Rider’s jacket after the test tube he had stolen had smashed. Her report—she was always thorough—had begun with wool, polyester, and apple juice. The first two, of course, were the materials of the jacket itself. The third had perhaps been a spill during school lunch.

But the rest of the ingredients had been more interesting. According to Redwing, the test tube had contained something that she called *bitrites infestans*. This was essentially a biological soup that seemed to have been developed from a variety of different mushrooms. It was too soon to say which mushrooms exactly had been used, but preliminary tests were surprising. The liquid was completely harmless. It even had a nutritional value. Although it would taste disgusting, it could be consumed by humans or animals with no side effects. Redwing had eaten once or twice at the Mandarin, so she had concluded by saying, “They could serve it at your club, Mr. Blunt, and you might not even send it back.

Why they’re making so much of it is a little puzzling. A thousand gallons? Is that what your agent said?

Well, I can't tell you what they're going to do with it, but I can assure you that the worst it would give you is indigestion... .”

Alex had told Jack what had happened at Greenfields, and she had in turn informed MI6. The appearance of Desmond McCain, the chase through the complex, the Poison Dome, the escape from the roof ... they knew all of this. But, like Alex, they still had no clear idea what exactly was going on.

The waiter retreated and Mrs. Jones tried to answer Blunt's question. "I'm not at all surprised that McCain is up to no good," she said. "He has a criminal record, after all."

"Didn't he convert to Christianity?"

"So he claims—and to be fair, his charity, First Aid, has done some very good work. But after what Alex has told us ..."

"Of course." This time, Blunt was going to believe everything Alex had said. After all, as much as it embarrassed him to admit it, the boy had been right in the past and MI6 had been proved wrong. "Is there any link between McCain and this man Leonard Straik?" he asked.

"None that we've been able to find."

"What do we know about McCain's movements in the past five years?"

"I'm having a report prepared. It'll be on your desk this afternoon."

Blunt broke the crust on his pie and examined the contents. The food at the Mandarin Club was not good, but the members liked it that way. It reminded them of school. "I have to say, I'm quite worried about all this," he said. "I always had a feeling that the department would have to turn its attention to GM food one day. There are people out there doing things that half the world doesn't even understand."

"We are what we eat." Mrs. Jones had lost her appetite. She put down her knife and fork.

"That was why I was interested in Mr. Straik. And if he's working hand-in-hand with McCain, that's certainly alarming. We need to know what the two of them are up to."

"What about Alex?" Mrs. Jones asked.

"As usual, Alex has done an extremely good job. We really are going to have to make sure we recruit him full-time after he finishes college. He's already shown himself to be more resourceful than a great many of our adult agents." Blunt stuck his fork into the pie and pulled out a piece of rather fatty meat covered in thick brown gravy. "But as far as this business is concerned, he's no longer involved. Maybe you should drop him a note, Mrs. Jones. We've treated him badly in the past, but perhaps we could send him a brief thank-you? And maybe we should enclose a bag of candy."

Alan Blunt began to eat his lunch. He was still puzzled about the mushroom soup, but his department would work on it. That was the important thing. In the meantime, Alex Rider was already out of his mind.

Chapter 16: SPECIAL DELIVERY

ALEX COULD TELL JACK was in a bad mood. She had made the breakfast as she did every morning

—boiled eggs for him, fruit and muesli for her. There had been a freshly ironed jacket waiting for him in his room. But she had stamped around the kitchen in silence, and when she had loaded the dishwasher, she had slid the plates in as if she had a personal grudge against them.

He knew what had upset her. “Jack,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” She lifted up the toaster and wiped away imaginary crumbs.

“I am. Really.”

Jack turned around and let out a sigh. She could never stay angry for long and they both knew it. “I just don’t understand you sometimes,” she said. “We both agreed that Greenfields wasn’t your business.

You did what you were told and you were lucky to get out alive. So what on earth did you think you were up to?”

“I don’t know.” Alex thought for a moment. “I just felt angry after being told off by Mr. Bray. And I thought, if I could only find out what McCain was doing ...”

“What exactly *is* he doing?” Jack sat down at the table. “You say there was a film set, an African village. But why? What’s the point?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. McCain runs a charity. First Aid. They have appeals all over the world.

Maybe that’s his plan. He wants to raise money for something that hasn’t happened.”

“A fake charity appeal.”

“Exactly. He shows a film of some village that doesn’t exist. People send in money. He gets to keep it.”

Jack thought about it for a moment, and then shook her head. “It wouldn’t work, Alex. These days, everything is on TV or in the newspapers. People would find out soon enough if it wasn’t true.”

“Can you think of anything else?”

“No. But I think we should go back to MI6 and leave it to them this time.” She glanced meaningfully at him. “Okay?”

Alex smiled. “That’s what I’d already decided,” he said. “Do you mind going back?”

“Of course not,” Jack replied. “I’m beginning to wonder where this is all going to end. You go to a party in Scotland and you end up at the bottom of a lake. A school field trip almost lands you in the hospital. And now this!” She took one of Alex’s toast slices and bit it in half. “The trouble is, you’ve got too much of the spy in you. It’s all your uncle’s fault. And your father’s. And your grandfather’s.

For all we know, he was probably a spy too.”

Alex looked at his watch. It was a quarter past eight. “I ought to be on my way to school,” he said.

“Yes.” Jack nodded. “Let’s not get into any more trouble with Mr. Bray.”

Alex ran up to his room, collected his books, and put on the spare jacket. He was about to leave when he noticed the black gel-ink pen that Smithers had given him resting on his desk. On impulse, he slipped it inside his pocket. He knew that Tom Harris would get a kick out of seeing it.

He hurried back downstairs and out through the hall, calling out a last “Good-bye!” as he went.

“Don’t forget your scarf!” Jack called back.

She was too late. It was cold outside but dry, and there was no wind. Alex hoisted his knapsack over his shoulder and made his way along the backstreets that would lead him to the King’s Road.

This part of Chelsea was full of elegant townhouses standing side by side with expensive cars parked outside. In a few months, the trees would blossom and the wisteria would tumble down the brickwork.

Ian Rider had liked being here because it was quiet and private and yet still in the middle of the city.

He’d always had a hatred of the suburbs. “A nice place for children and vets.” Alex could still hear his slightly cryptic remark.

There was a FedEx van at the end of the street, badly parked across the corner, and two men dressed in overalls examining a clipboard that they held between them. They were obviously lost, and as Alex approached, one of them came over to him.

“Excuse me, mate,” he said. “We’ve got a delivery for Packard Street. You wouldn’t know where it is, would you?”

Alex shook his head. “There’s no Packard Street around here.”

“Are you sure? That’s what it says here.” The man held out the clipboard, inviting Alex to take a look.

It was the empty van that alerted him.

The doors of the van were open, and if they were making a delivery to an address in Chelsea, why was there nothing inside?

Alex jerked back, but it was already too late. The two men had maneuvered Alex between them so that they were perfectly placed, one of them in front of him, one of them behind. He heard the clipboard hit the sidewalk. It was just a prop. They didn’t need it anymore.

One of the men grabbed him by the throat. Alex twisted around, trying to break free. At the same time, he saw something that sent a chill up his spine. The second deliveryman had produced a hypodermic syringe. They weren’t here to kill him. They were here to take him. The van was for him.

Alex put everything he had been taught into action. He knew that it would be almost impossible even

for two grown men to drag him into the van ... unless they made contact with the needle. That was what he had to avoid. So he didn't waste any energy trying to break free of the neck lock. It was too strong anyway. Instead, he used the man's own strength against him, levering himself back, raising both legs off the ground and lashing out. The man with the syringe had been looking for somewhere to plant it, and with a smile of satisfaction, Alex saw the soles of his shoes smash into it, breaking it against the man's chest. If they'd been planning to knock him out, they could forget it. Now it would be twice as hard to make him disappear.

So far, no more than about ten seconds had passed since the attack had begun, and Alex knew that time was on his side. The streets of Chelsea might be quiet, but it was eight thirty in the morning and people would be on their way to work. He couldn't call for help. He was still being strangled. But someone would see what was happening. They had to.

Sure enough, a figure turned the corner and Alex was overjoyed to see the blue-and-silver uniform of a policeman. Alex felt the man behind him loosen his grip as the policeman ran forward, and he gratefully sucked in air.

"What's going on here?" the policeman demanded.

"They ... ," Alex began, and stopped as he felt something stab him in the back, just above his waist. A second needle! The man who had been holding him must have taken it out of his pocket. But surely ...

The policeman wasn't doing anything, and even as the strength drained out of him and his legs buckled, Alex understood. The policeman wasn't any more real than the deliverymen had been. They were all in it together. Alex had been tricked and there was nothing he could do as whatever drug had been pumped into him coursed through his system. He saw the street tilt and then turn sideways and knew that the only reason he wasn't lying flat on the sidewalk was because the deliverymen had caught him and were carrying him into the van.

He was angry with himself. Only a few minutes ago, Jack had been accusing him. He could have died at Elm's Cross and she would have never known what had happened to him. He had promised her it would never happen again. And yet it already had. In a few hours, the school would report him missing.

She would think he had betrayed her again. If he died, he would never be able to tell her the truth.

This was all his fault. He shouldn't have gone to the film studio. He should never have gotten involved with Desmond McCain in the first place. He wished he could call Jack and tell her. But it was too late.

Barely conscious, already unable to struggle, he was bundled into the back of the van. He didn't even hear the doors slam shut.

Alex opened his eyes.

Someone was doing something to his head. A lock of light brown hair twisted, falling in front of his eyes. At the same time he heard the snip of scissors. He was sitting in a chair in what looked like a

hotel room. They hadn't tied him up, but they didn't need to. He was still drugged and couldn't move. He'd been taken out of his school uniform and dressed in an ill-fitting tracksuit. They were cutting his hair. The two deliverymen were standing over him. There was a window covered by a blind and, at the very corner of his vision, an unmade bed. No carpet. His feet seemed to be resting on some sort of metal shelf, but he didn't have the strength to look down.

The two men were talking, their voices like distant echoes that he couldn't make out. One of them noticed he was awake and grabbed his head, squeezing his cheeks between thumb and fingers. More of his hair tumbled down into his lap. He could feel the cold air touching his scalp.

"He's back," the man said.

"Good."

A woman appeared from nowhere—she must have been standing behind him—and Alex recognized Myra Beckett, the supervisor of Greenfields. Bizarrely, she was dressed as a nurse, complete with a starched white hat. The diagonal fringe of dark hair looked more severe than ever, as if it had been sliced with a single sword stroke. Her eyes, behind the round, gold glasses, were slightly crazy. Alex's mouth was dry and he was feeling sick, but he managed to swear at her, a single venomous word.

"We'll do it now," she said.

They took hold of his arm and rolled up his sleeve. Alex winced as they gave him another injection, a long needle sliding into the flesh just above his wrist. But this time they didn't remove it. Beckett taped it in place and Alex saw there was a tube connecting it to a plastic box about the size of a cigarette packet, which they taped to his arm.

"This IV will continue to give you a timed injection of the drugs we are using over the next few hours," Beckett explained. "You will not be able to move or to speak. There will be other side effects.

Try to breathe normally."

Alex felt a wave of a nausea. He was completely helpless. And whatever these people were planning, it wasn't going to end in this room.

The men rolled back his sleeve, hiding the plastic box. Alex knew that it was pumping its venom, drip by drip, into his bloodstream. He tried to jerk his arm but he had no strength at all. He swore at Beckett a second time, but his voice was no longer working and all that came out was an inarticulate grunt.

Beckett leaned over him and pressed a pair of glasses onto his face. Alex tried to shake them off, but they were tight-fitting, hooked over his ears. "You can take him out now," she said.

He was in a wheelchair! Alex didn't realize it until one of the men spun him around and pushed him out the door. They turned into a long corridor. "Wait a minute," Beckett said. She stepped forward and crouched beside Alex so that her face was close to his. "What do you think?" she asked, with a thin smile.

There was a full-length mirror at the end of the corridor. Alex stared at himself in shock and disbelief.

His hair had been cut so hideously that he looked two years older than his true age and completely pitiful. The tracksuit was the color of a nasty bruise. It was one size too big and it was covered in stains, as if he was unable to feed himself. His skin was pale and unhealthy. The glasses he had been given were deliberately ugly; black plastic with thick lenses. They hung slightly crooked on his face.

The drugs had attacked his muscles, paralyzing him and somehow changing the shape of his entire body. His jaw hung open and his eyes were glazed. Alex knew exactly what they had done. They had turned him into a foul parody of a disabled person. They had made him look brain-damaged ... but worse than that, they had removed his dignity too. In a way, it was a brilliant disguise. People might glance at him in the street, but they would be too embarrassed to look twice. Beckett was taking their prejudices and using them to her own advantage.

Beckett must have given a signal. Alex was taken down the corridor and around to an elevator. After that, the extra drugs must have kicked in, because his world seemed to skip and jump.

He had the foggy sensation of being on the street and wheeled into the van.

He was in the van.

He was at Heathrow Airport! Hadn't he been here just a few weeks ago with Sabina and her parents?

The terminal lights hurt his eyes and he saw people staring briefly at him, then turning away, ashamed of themselves. He tried to call out for help, but the low, pathetic mumbling that came out of his lips only added to the impression that he was handicapped. They had no idea what was going on. They wouldn't even begin to guess that he was being kidnapped, spirited away in front of their eyes.

Passport control. They had provided Alex with fake documents, of course, but it seemed to him that the official didn't look too closely. A boy in a wheelchair accompanied by a nurse. The two men had stayed behind.

"Jonathan loves flying on big airplanes. Don't you, Jonathan!" Beckett was talking to him, addressing him as if he were six years old.

I'm not ... Alex wanted to tell the passport officer his real name. But nothing resembling a word came out.

And now he was in some sort of lounge.

Now being wheeled down a corridor.

On the plane. A seat had been taken out to make room for the wheelchair. Other passengers were passing him, carrying their luggage. He saw them glance in his direction. Each time the reaction was the same. Puzzlement, the realization that something was wrong, then pity, and finally a sense of embarrassment. The drug was making his knee twitch. His hand, resting on the knee, was doing the same.

"Try to get some sleep, Jonathan," Beckett said. "It's a long flight."

Where were they taking him? And why? Did they really think they could get away with this, whisking

him out of the country with a fake ID? Jack would already know he was missing. The school would have called her and she would have alerted MI6. They would be looking for him. Every airport would be watched.

Except ...

What day was this? He could have been kept drugged for a few hours or a week. Or a month. Alex had no control over his body, but they had left his mind intact ... hadn't they?

He was alert enough to realize it wasn't completely hopeless. Everything led back to Desmond McCain. MI6 knew what had happened at Greenfields. Jack would tell them about Elm's Cross. They would track down McCain and that would lead them to him.

They were in the air. How was that possible? Alex couldn't remember taking off. How long had they been flying? He tried to work out where they might be going. It had been light when they were on the runway, and it was still light now. If they had been in the air for a while, that would suggest, at the very least, that they weren't heading east. The different time zones would have brought the night in faster.

South, then, or west? He couldn't turn his head—the muscles in his neck refused to work—but as they had filed past, he had noticed that many of the other passengers were black, dressed in clothes that were too brightly colored for the UK. They could be going home.

Africa.

Food was served—but not to him. The stewardess smiled at him sadly, as if understanding that he couldn't feed himself. Beckett brought out some baby food and tried to force it into his mouth with a spoon. Using all his remaining strength, Alex kept his mouth shut. He wasn't going to be humiliated by her any more than he had been already.

Hours passed, yet Alex hardly was aware of it.

They were on the ground.

The doors were open.

And then Alex was being wheeled through an arrivals hall, and a poster on the wall answered the question he had been asking himself for the past how-many hours. A brightly dressed black woman with a huge smile, holding a basket of fruit. And a caption.

SMILE! YOU'RE IN KENYA.

Kenya! Vaguely, Alex remembered something that Edward Pleasure had told him. “*He's the part owner of a safari camp somewhere in Kenya.*” The words might have been spoken a century ago and on a different planet. Had he really once been in Kilmore Castle, dancing with Sabina? What would she say if she could see him now?

The plastic box was still resting against his arm, and he actually felt the whole thing vibrate as the timing mechanism clicked in, sending another spurt of the liquid into his veins. He felt

unconsciousness returning and didn't even try to fight it. He was on his own, thousands of miles from home. He had fallen into the hands of a ruthless enemy and nobody knew where he was. Ahead of him, a set of automatic doors swung open. Alex was wheeled into the dark.

Chapter 17: A SHORT FLIGHT TO NOWHERE

MOVEMENT RETURNED, one twitch at a time.

Alex had no idea how long he had been here, but he guessed that it couldn't have been much more than twenty-four hours. He had watched the sun rise, not out of the window but through the cloth that made up the wall. He was lying on his back on a comfortable bed in what seemed to be a cross between a luxury hotel room and a large tent. The floor was made of polished wood. There was an expensive-looking wardrobe, a carved wooden table, and two chairs. A fan hung from the ceiling above his head, turning continuously. He was completely enclosed by a mosquito net that rippled in the breeze. But the walls were made of canvas. The windows consisted of two flaps, fastened from the outside.

Where exactly was he? From the sounds that surrounded him—the chatter of monkeys, the occasional bellow of an elephant, the constant whoops and screams of exotic birds—it seemed that he was in the bush, somewhere in the middle of Kenya.

That tied in with his memories of the journey here, even if they were still confused. There had been the poster he had seen. SMILE! YOU'RE IN KENYA. As if he had felt remotely like smiling! They had gone through passport control, and after that the drug must have kicked in again. They had driven across a city, but he had barely seen any of it. It had been late evening. Nairobi? And then there had been a second, smaller airport and another plane, this one a four-seater with propellers. They had bundled him in, leaving the wheelchair behind. And then ...

He had woken up here, on his own. It was dark ... evening or night. But they had left two little battery lights on—battery, not electric. At least he could see, even if he couldn't yet move. The plastic box had been removed from his arm and a dirty bandage stuck over the puncture where the needle had gone in.

That had been the first thing he had noticed—and he'd been grateful for it. With the drug no longer pumping into his system, he had begun to recover. He could lift his hand. He could turn his head from side to side, taking in the sweep of the room. Eventually he had stood up and tottered on unsteady legs into the bathroom, behind the bed, separated by a screen. He had thrown up and that made him feel better. Then he had taken a cold shower, the water washing away some of the horror of the past day.

He had still been too weak to make his way outside. He had decided he would wait for the sun. Once again he had fallen asleep, but this time more normally.

And now it was morning. Alex rolled off the bed and stood up. He had slept in his shorts. The tracksuit that they had dressed him in was lying on the floor, a crumpled heap. He noticed that his school uniform had been brought over from England. It seemed somehow strange to see it, but of course he had been wearing it when he was kidnapped. He went over to it, feeling in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Yes. It was there. He had been carrying the black gel-ink pen that Smithers had given him and nobody had thought to remove it. It wasn't as powerful as the device that had brought down the factory

chimney, but it might still be useful. At the very least, it gave Alex hope. McCain had made his first mistake.

He was now moving completely normally. They had used a powerful drug on him, but it had left his system completely. Just to be sure, he forced himself to do twenty push-ups, then had another shower.

He got dressed in his own pants and shirt, leaving off the jacket. Although it was early morning, it was already warm. He could feel the sun beating through the walls of the tent and the fan was having to fight against the sluggish air. He slipped the gel-ink pen into his pants pocket. From now on, he would make sure it never left him.

The front of the tent was sealed up. There was a large flap with a zipper running around the side. Well, if this was his prison, it was a very flimsy one. Alex went over and unzipped it. At once he saw the green of the jungle, confirming what he had guessed. He was in the bush. But the way was blocked by a guard, a black man dressed in jeans and grimy shirt, a rifle strapped over his shoulder. Alex realized that he must have been there all night.

The guard turned around and scowled. "You stay inside." That seemed to be the limit of his English.

"What time do you serve breakfast?" Alex asked. He had already decided. He wasn't going to let these people think he was scared.

"Inside." The guard brought the rifle around.

Alex raised his hands and retreated. There was no point starting a fight. Not yet.

Breakfast came half an hour later: tea, canned orange juice, and two slices of toast, carried in by a second guard. Alex wolfed it down. It had been a long time since he had last eaten and his stomach couldn't have been more empty. There was a bottle of water in the tent, and he drank that too. He had no idea what was going to happen to him. He would take any food or water he could get.

Why had they brought him here? Alex almost admired McCain. The man must have nerves of steel, kidnapping him in broad daylight, smuggling him out of England through one of the world's busiest airports. But what was the point? McCain must have identified him as the intruder at Greenfields. He would have remembered their meeting at the castle in Scotland. Maybe he had decided to take revenge.

After all, he had already tried to kill Alex once.

And yet, somehow, Alex didn't believe it. Whatever McCain was planning, the stakes were too high.

This wasn't personal. This was business. McCain needed Alex for a reason.

And now Alex was completely in his power. It was probably best not to think too much about what might lie ahead.

Instead, Alex thought about Jack. What would she be doing now? And what about MI6? Once they'd realized he was gone, they'd have spared no effort. Every intelligence agency in the world would be looking for him. Surely someone would remember a fourteen-year-old boy being taken through passport control, even if he was in a wheelchair. The trail would lead to Kenya and they must know that McCain had a base here.

Except that McCain would have covered his tracks. He knew exactly what he was doing. Alex was going to have to rely on his own resources to get himself out of this mess. He would just have to wait for an opportunity and take it when it came.

The tent flap suddenly opened and Myra Beckett stepped inside. She had changed once again, wearing a safari outfit—a loose shirt and long pants in different shades of brown. The clothes made her look more masculine than ever. She was carrying what looked like a leather cloth.

She wasn't alone. A guard had come with her, but not the one he had seen earlier. This one had on dirty jeans and a black sleeveless T-shirt. Alex noticed the knotted muscles of his arms and the machete hanging from his belt. He had narrow, mean eyes. He was looking at Alex as if the two of them had been lifelong enemies.

"I heard you were up," Beckett said. "How are you feeling?"

Alex wasn't sure what to say. Just seeing her made him feel sick again. "Never better," he muttered.

"The serum that we injected you with was my own invention, and I'm very pleased with the way it worked. It was derived from the water hemlock that we cultivate at Greenfields. The effect is not dissimilar to a snake bite, only far less permanent. Can I trust you to behave yourself? If not, we can always inject you with some more."

"What do you want with me?" Alex asked.

"You'll find out in good time. For the moment, let me introduce you to Njenga." She gestured at the guard. "He's a Kikuyu tribesman, as are all the guards here, and they will do anything we tell them.

There are no other jobs, you see. You might like to know that the Kikuyus once fought against the British with a ferocity that made them a source of great terror. One of their tricks was to impale their victims with a spear up their backside, then leave them to die slowly on the side of a hill. I mention this only as a warning not to annoy them."

"Nice to meet you, Njenga," Alex said.

Njenga's scowl deepened.

"Where's McCain?" Alex demanded.

"The Reverend McCain won't be here until later today. It is very likely that your friends in MI6 are watching him, so he had to take a more roundabout route. But he's hoping to have dinner with you this evening. In the meantime, I thought you might like to come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"Oh—nowhere in particular." Beckett smiled, her lips barely moving. "A short flight to nowhere." She lifted the piece of leather and Alex saw that it was a flying cap. "You don't mind another plane?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"Not really. This way ..."

She led him out of the tent.

He was in a safari camp. The tent where he had spent the night was one of a dozen, each one surrounded by a wooden veranda and built into the embrace of a wide river that swept around them.

Alex looked at the silver water rippling past, with a tangled wall of green rising in a steep bank on the other side. This really was a beautiful spot. He heard chattering above him and looked up to see a family of gray monkeys leaping from the branches of a juniper tree, using their hands and tails. Some of the mothers had tiny babies clinging to their chests.

“The monkeys are a nuisance,” Beckett muttered. She snapped out an order in another language and one of the guards standing beside the path lifted his rifle and fired. A dead monkey plunged out of the tree and crashed to the ground. The others scattered. “The guards are equally accurate with guns and spears,” she went on. “They keep the population down.”

“What is this place?” Alex asked. He was careful not to react to what he had just seen. He knew it had been done for his benefit.

“This is the Simba River Camp, a business that belongs to Mr. McCain. I take it you know which country you’re in?”

“Kenya.”

“That’s right.” Another hint of a smile. It was as if she had forgotten how to do the real thing. “We’re on the edge of the Rift Valley. Simba River Camp was once a world-class safari lodge with visitors from America, Europe, and Japan. Brad Pitt once stayed here. Unfortunately, it became a victim of the global recession. The visitors stopped coming and the business went bust.”

Looking around, Alex could see it for himself. His was the only tent that had been occupied. The others were empty and falling into disrepair. The path that they were following had been neglected, with weeds and wild grass breaking through. They passed a swimming pool, but it had no water and the cement was cracked. All around, the vegetation was tumbling over itself, out of control. If the camp was left to itself for much longer, it would be swallowed up, disappearing into the bush, and nobody would know that it had ever existed.

They came to a beaten-up Land Rover with dirty windows and wires tumbling out of the dashboard.

Njenga climbed into the driving seat with Beckett next to him. Alex went in the back. He was moving completely normally now and he was glad of it. Even on this short journey, he might get a chance to break away.

“It’s seventy miles to the next camp, and I doubt that you’d ever find it,” Beckett said. She must have seen what he was thinking. “So please don’t entertain any foolish ideas. The Kikuyus are also excellent trackers. They would be able to follow your trail in the darkness, even in the pouring rain. I’m afraid Njenga would enjoy hacking you to pieces. That’s the sort of person he is. If I were you, I wouldn’t give him the opportunity.”

They rumbled along a dirt track for a couple of minutes, passing through a wire fence with a rusting gateway and leaving the camp behind them. Almost at once they came to an airstrip—a dusty orange runway that had somehow been cut through the long grass. A dilapidated wooden hut stood to one side, with a wind sock hanging limply from a pole. This must have been where Alex landed when he

was brought to Simba River Camp, although he had no memory of it.

There was a plane parked on the grass next to a line of about thirty oil drums. Alex had never seen anything quite like it. It was like an oversized toy with two seats, one behind the other, three wheels, and a single propeller at the front. It had no cabin or cockpit. A slanting window would protect the pilot, but any passenger would be sitting outside, feeling the full force of the air currents. A single wing, on struts, stretched out from left to right, and Alex saw a series of rubber tubes running all the way to the tips. These were connected to two plastic drums lashed to the side of the plane just behind the passenger seat.

It was a crop duster, but a very old one. It should have been in a museum. Alex wondered if it could really fly.

“This is the Piper J-3 Cub,” Beckett told him. She had taken off her glasses and was putting on the flying cap, fastening it under her chin. She was also wearing a leather jacket, which she had brought from the Land Rover. Alex noticed that she wasn’t offering him anything to keep him warm. “Twenty-two feet long. Sixty-five horsepower engine. They used them for training during the war. Please, get in.”

Njenga stood near the car. Alex was feeling increasingly uneasy, but he did as he was told. There was a metal lever between the seats connected to a control box, with two sets of wires running toward the wings. When he sat down, it was right in front of him. There was almost no room for his feet. Myra Beckett got into the front and made a few checks. She produced a pair of goggles and slipped them over her eyes. Then she flicked a switch and the propeller began to turn.

It took a full minute to blur and then come up to speed. Alex could feel the high-pitched buzz of the engine and knew that from this point on there would be no more conversation. That suited him. He had nothing to say to the woman.

Njenga moved forward and pulled the chocks from under the wheels. Alex clicked on his seat belt. The Piper rolled forward.

They taxied to the end of the runway, bumping up and down on the uneven surface. At least Beckett seemed to be an experienced pilot. She spun the plane around, then raced back again, the engine straining like an overworked lawnmower. Alex wondered if they had enough speed to get into the air, but after one last bump they were up, with the wind rushing past and the ground sweeping away below.

Alex looked back. He could see Njenga standing on his own beside the car and behind him, separated by a line of brush, Simba River Camp, with the water now a silver ribbon twisting around it. The far bank rose steeply, then sloped down again, opening onto a great savannah that fanned out to the horizon. He saw a herd of antelope, startled by the sound of the engine, racing across the plain as if it were a bed of hot coals, their feet barely touching the grass. In any other circumstances, it would have been a beautiful sight. The flat African landscape, with its burned-out yellows and browns, had a true majesty. The sun was shining. The sky was a brilliant blue. Just for a moment, he was able to forget the trouble he was in.

Beckett had taken the Piper to a height of perhaps one thousand feet, at the same time tilting away

from the river, heading north. Alex could see the compass on the control panel in front of her. He studied the landscape, holding up a hand to protect his eyes from the slice of the wind. They were flying over a sprawl of green, but there were hills ahead of them, gray and rocky, rising up to the east and west, then closing together to form an upside-down V. In the far distance, he made out what looked like a man-made wall, but it would have to be a very big one if he could see it from here. Over to one side, he noticed a track winding up into the hills, and an electricity pylon. Had Beckett been lying when she said there was no one around for seventy miles? There seemed to be signs of civilization much closer than that.

They flew over a wheat field. The entire valley between the hills had been planted with the crop, which looked almost ready to harvest. Alex could see thousands of golden blades bending in the breeze. He wondered how it could possibly grow out here in this heat, and a moment later he got his answer. The wall he had seen was a dam built into the neck of the valley. The plane flew over it and suddenly they were above water, a huge lake stretching out to the mountain range on the far shore. The water must somehow feed into the river. It would also be used to feed the crops.

Beckett pulled on the joystick and the Piper Cub performed a tight circle, the whole continent tipping on its side. Alex felt his ears pop and he was glad he was belted in. For a few seconds he had almost been upside down, and in a plane like this it would be easy enough to tumble out. They were flying back exactly the same way they had come. For a second time, they passed over the lip of the dam. The wheat field lay ahead of them, less than half a mile away.

For the first time, Beckett turned around and called out to him. Her eyes, behind the goggles, looked enormous. “When I tell you, I want you to pull the lever.” Alex could barely hear what she was saying.

She repeated herself, stressing each word. He nodded.

Pull the lever? What was this all about? Alex wondered if he might be about to eject himself, if this hadn't all been some cruel and horrible trick. But he had no choice but to play along, and anyway, if he refused, it would be easy enough for her to reach back and do it herself.

They swept in low over the wheat and Beckett signaled with one hand. Alex pulled the lever. At once, there was a gurgle. Alex felt the rubber pipes under his feet swell as liquid rushed through them, and seconds later a spray began to burst out from beneath the wings, spreading out in the air and falling evenly onto the crop. He wondered why he was even remotely surprised. The plane was a crop duster and that was what they were doing. Dusting the crops.

They flew over the field four times before the liquid ran out. Alex could only sit there, watching the artificial rain, completely mystified. At last, Beckett turned around again. “Now we can go back!” she shouted.

It took them just a few minutes to return to the runway. Njenga was still waiting for them, leaning against the Land Rover in the heat of the sun. Alex saw his head turn slowly as they approached. He had been smoking a cigarette. He dropped it and ground it out under his foot.

They landed. The plane rattled back to the grass and came to a standstill. Myra Beckett flicked off the engine, then took off her goggles and helmet and climbed down. Alex followed her. He was glad to

have his feet back on the ground. He stood there, waiting for her to explain herself.

“Did you enjoy that?” she asked.

“What was it all about?” Alex demanded. Suddenly he was angry. “Why don’t you stop playing games with me? I don’t know what you’re doing, but you’ve got no reason to keep me here. I want to see McCain. And I want to go home.”

“Desmond will be here this evening and he will explain everything to you, including the purpose of our little flight today. But I’m afraid I have to tell you there’s no chance of your going home.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re going to kill you, you silly boy. Surely you must have realized that. But first we’re going to hurt you. You see, there are things we need to know. I’m afraid you do have a very unpleasant time ahead of you. If I were you, I’d get as much rest as you can.”

She untangled her eyeglasses and put them back on. Then, with a brief laugh, she walked back to the waiting car.

Chapter 18: WOLF MOON

ALEX HEARD DESMOND MCCAIN arrive later that afternoon. He came in a plane that was larger than the Piper, with a deeper, more solid-sounding engine. Alex didn't actually see it—he hadn't been allowed out of his tent since the flight with Myra Beckett—but he heard it land.

He had been on his own all afternoon. Only once, a Kikuyu guard had come in carrying a meager lunch on a tray: fruit, bread, and water. He refused to think about what the Beckett woman had told him. He had been threatened before and he knew that part of her plan was to weaken him psychologically, to sap his resolve.

Instead, he used the time to collect his thoughts. He presumed the crop duster had been carrying the liquid that had been developed at Greenfields. But what was the point of spraying a single field in Kenya, and why had Beckett made such a big deal of it? Alex tried to connect the dots. An international charity, a dead African village mocked up in a film studio, his own kidnapping, the wheat field. The more he thought about it, the more unsettled he became, and in the end he pushed it out of his mind and dozed off. He would let McCain explain himself when the time came.

But the sun had set and darkness fallen before Beckett returned to the tent.

“The Reverend McCain would like you to join him for dinner,” she announced.

“That’s very kind of him.” Alex swung himself off the bed. “I hope it’s better than the lunch.”

Once again, they left the tent.

Simba River Camp looked better at night than it had in the day. There was a full moon and the pale light softened everything and made the river sparkle. There were a few lights burning in the camp, but they were hardly needed when the sky was so full of stars. The air smelled of perfume. Cicadas were already at work, grinding away in the shadows.

Alex followed the woman to what was clearly the center of the camp, a circular clearing with the river on one side and acacia trees on all the others, the wide branches stretching out as if to form a protective screen. Two wooden buildings stood opposite each other. One was a welcome center and administrative office. The other combined a bar, lounge, and restaurant. It had a thatched roof that was much too big for it, almost thrown over it like pastry on a pie. There were no windows or doors ... in fact, no walls.

Alex could imagine the guests meeting here for iced gin and tonics after their long day spotting wild game ... except the tables were piled up in the corner and the bar was closed.

He noticed a satellite dish mounted on the roof of the first building and realized there must be a radio somewhere inside. Might it be possible to send out a message? He doubted it. There were yet more guards patrolling the area—there must have been a dozen of them altogether—these ones armed with spears, which they carried as if they'd had them from the day they were born. Guns and spears. It seemed a strange combination in the twenty-first century, but Alex guessed that in the hands of the Kikuyu tribesmen, one would be just as dangerous as the other.

“Over here, Alex.”

There was a raised platform close to the river with a bonfire burning low to one side. The embers were glowing bright red and the smell of charcoal crept into the air. A table and chairs had been laid out on the platform with two white china plates, two crystal wine glasses, but only one set of silver knives and forks.

“You’re not joining us?” Alex asked.

Beckett added a couple of branches to the fire. “Mr. McCain has asked to eat with you alone.”

“Well, you can do the washing up.”

“Still making jokes? We’ll see if you find this all so amusing tomorrow.”

She spun around and left him. It occurred to Alex that she might be annoyed that she hadn’t been invited. He still hadn’t worked out what her part in all this might be. She was a scientist, after all. What had persuaded her to throw in her lot with Desmond McCain?

Alex sat down. A bottle of French wine, already opened, stood next to a jug of water. He helped himself to the water. His eye fell on one of the knives. It looked sharp, with a serrated edge. Would anyone notice if it was missing? He glanced around, then slid it off the table and into the waistband of his pants. He felt the blade against his skin, strangely comforting. He would use his bread knife when it was time to eat.

He glanced over at the river, wondering what animals might gather there in the night. There was no fence, no barrier between them and the camp. He had seen monkeys and antelope. Might there be lions too? Despite everything, he had to admit that this was a memorable place, with the river sweeping around, the fire blazing, the African bush with all its secrets. He looked up at the night sky, packed with so many stars that even in the vastness of the universe they seemed to be fighting for space. And there, right in the middle of them, huge and pale ...

“They call it the Wolf Moon.”

The voice came out of the shadows. Desmond McCain had appeared from nowhere, walking up to the table in no particular hurry. Alex wondered how long he had been standing there, watching him.

McCain was dressed in a gray silk suit, black polished shoes, and a black T-shirt. He was carrying a laptop computer that seemed to weigh nothing in his hand. His face gave nothing away. He sat at the table and laid the computer down. Then he unfolded his napkin and looked at Alex as if noticing him for the first time.

“American Indians call it that,” he went on. “But I have heard the name used here too. It is also known as the Hunger Moon, which is strangely appropriate. I have been waiting for it. The moon is important to my plans.”

“There’s a name for people with an interest in the moon,” Alex said. “They’re called lunatics.”

McCain laughed briefly but without making any sound. “The late Harold Bulman told me a great deal about you,” he said. “I was impressed by what I heard, but I have to say I am even more impressed now. Any other boy who had been through what you have been through would be a sniveling wreck.

Far away from home. Transported in a manner that could not have been agreeable. And you're still brave enough to trade insults with me. At first I was disinclined to believe that the British intelligence services would have recruited a fourteen-year-old child. But I'm already beginning to see why they chose you."

"Bulman is dead?" Alex wasn't sure what else to say.

"Yes. He told me what I wanted to know and then I killed him. I enjoyed doing so. If you have learned anything about me, Alex, it won't surprise you that I have a strong dislike of journalists." McCain picked up the bottle. "Will you have some wine?"

"I'll stick to water."

"I'm glad to hear it. You're too young to drink." McCain poured himself a glass of the wine. Alex saw the swirl of red against the side of the glass. "Did you have a good day?" he asked. "Did Myra look after you?"

"She took me for a ride in the crop duster."

"Do you know that she taught herself to fly? She never had a single lesson. She merely had a complete understanding of the laws of physics and worked it all out. She is a remarkable woman. When this is over, she and I plan to get married."

"You must let me know what to buy you."

"I doubt that you'll be invited, Alex." McCain still hadn't drunk any of the wine. He was gazing into the glass as if he could see his future in it. "The meal will be brought over very shortly. Have you ever eaten ostrich?"

"They don't serve it in the school cafeteria ... at least not that I'm aware of."

"The meat can be quite tough, and you will need a sharp knife to cut it. I notice that your knife is missing. Can I suggest you return it to the table?"

Alex hesitated. But there was no point denying it. He took out the knife and placed it in front of him.

"What were you going to do with it?" McCain asked.

"I just thought it might come in useful."

"Were you planning to attack me?"

"No. But that's a good idea."

"I don't think so." He raised a hand and almost at once something whipped past Alex's head and buried itself in a tree. It was a spear. Alex saw it quivering in the trunk. He hadn't even seen who'd thrown it.

"You can see that it would be a great mistake to try anything unwise," McCain continued, as if nothing had happened. "I hope I have made myself clear."

"I think I get the point," Alex said.

“Excellent.”

“Are you going to tell me why I’m here?”

“All in good time.” McCain turned his head and for a moment the flames were reflected in his silver crucifix. It was as if there were a fire burning on the side of his face. “I am sure you will have worked out that I risked everything bringing you here. Your disappearance has already been reported on the English news and the police forces of the world are united in the search for you. But I am also playing for an enormous prize, Alex. It is a little bit like that poker game that first brought us together. All gamblers know that the greater the reward, the greater the risks.”

“I suppose you want to take over the world,” Alex said.

“Nothing as tiresome as that. World domination has never seemed particularly attractive to me.” He glanced up. “But it seems that dinner is about to be served. We can talk further as we eat.”

Two guards had appeared, carrying the dinner. They laid the food down on the table and disappeared.

Alex had been served a barbecued meat, sweet potatoes, and beans. McCain had a bowl of brown sludge.

“We have the same food,” McCain explained. “Unfortunately, I am no longer able to chew.” He took a small silver straw out of his top pocket. “My meal has been liquified.”

“Your boxing injury,” Alex said.

“It wasn’t so much the injury as the operation that I underwent afterward. My manager decided to send me to a plastic surgeon in Las Vegas. I should have known it would be a botch job. His clinic was above a casino. I take it you are familiar with my past?”

“You were knocked out by someone called Buddy Sangster when you were eighteen.”

“It happened at Madison Square Garden in New York, two minutes into the middleweight championship. Sangster destroyed not only my hopes of becoming world champion, but my career.

Then the surgeon made it difficult for me to speak and impossible to eat. Since then, I have only taken liquids, and every time I sit down for a meal, I remember him. But I had my revenge.”

Alex remembered what Edward Pleasure had told him. A year later, Buddy Sangster had fallen under a train. “You killed him,” he said.

“Actually, I paid to have him killed. An international assassin known as the Gentleman did the job for me. He also took care of the plastic surgeon. It was very expensive and, in truth, I would have preferred to have done it myself. But it was too dangerous. As you will learn, Alex, I am a man who takes infinite care.”

Alex wasn’t hungry, but he forced himself to eat the food. He would need all his energy for what was to come. He tried a mouthful of the ostrich. It was surprisingly good, a bit like beef but with a gamier flavor. He would just have to do his best not to picture the animal while he ate. Meanwhile, McCain had leaned down and was busily sucking. His own brown porridge entered his mouth with a brief slurping sound.

“I am going to tell you a little about myself,” McCain went on. “This is the third time you and I have encountered each other, Alex. We are enemies now and tomorrow, I’m afraid, we are going to have no time for idle chat. But I am a civilized man. You are a child. Tonight, under the Wolf Moon, we can behave as if we are friends. And I welcome the opportunity to tell my story. I’ve often been quite tempted to write a book.”

“You could have the launch party back in jail.”

“I would certainly be arrested if I were to make public what I’m about to tell you—but there is no chance of that happening.”

McCain put down his straw and dabbed at his lips with his napkin. His mouth was slanting the wrong way, as if it had been further dislodged by the food.

“I began my life with nothing,” he said. “You have to remember that. I had no parents, no family, no history, no friends, no anything. The people who fostered me in east London were kind enough in their own way. But did they care who or what I was? I was just one of many orphans that they took in. They were do-gooders. This was my first lesson in life. Do-gooders need victims. They need suffering.

Otherwise they cannot do good.

“I grew up in poverty. I went to a tough school, and from the very first day, the other children were very cruel to me. I can assure you that it is not a good start in life to be named after a bag of frozen food. I was bullied unmercifully. My color, of course, was against me. If you had ever been a victim of racism, Alex, you would know that it goes to the very heart of who you are. It destroys you.

“I soon came to understand that only one thing would keep me safe and separate me from the herd.

Only one thing would make a difference. Money! If I was rich, people wouldn’t care where I came from. They wouldn’t tease or torment me. They would respect me. That is the way modern life works, Alex. Look at self-satisfied pop singers or greasy, semi-literate athletes. People worship them. Why?”

“Because they’re talented.”

“Because they have money!” McCain almost shouted the words. His voice echoed across the clearing and a couple of the guards turned toward him, checking that everything was all right. “Money is the god of the twenty-first century,” he continued, more quietly. “It divides us and defines us. But it is no longer enough to have enough. You have to have more than enough. Look at the bankers with their salaries and their pensions and their bonuses and their extras. Why have one house when you can have ten? Why wait in line when you can have your own private jet? From the age of about thirteen, I realized that was what I wanted. And very soon, that is what I shall have.”

He had forgotten his food. He still hadn’t tasted the wine, but he held it in front of him, admiring the deep color, balancing the glass in the palm of his hand as if afraid of smashing it. Once again, Alex was aware of the power of the man. He could picture the huge muscles writhing underneath the silk suit.

“I had little education,” McCain went on. “The other children in my class saw to that. I had no prospects. I was, however, strong and fast on my feet. I became a boxer, which has seen more than

one working-class boy rise to riches and success. And for a time, it looked as if the same might happen to me. I was known as a rising star. I trained in a gym in Limehouse and I threw myself into it. Sometimes I would go there for ten hours a day. This was in many respects the happiest time of my life. I loved the feel of my fist smashing into an opponent's face. I loved the sight of blood. And the feeling of victory!

Once I knocked a man out. I thought for a moment I had killed him. It was a truly delicious sensation.

“But, as I have explained to you, my dream came to an end. My manager dropped me. The press, which had once fawned over me, forgot me. I returned to London with no money and no job. I had to move back in with my foster parents, but they didn't really want me. I was no longer a cute little boy that they could feel good about helping. I was a man. There was no room for me in their life.

“My foster father managed to get me a job with a real estate developer, and that was how I found myself in the lucrative world of property. It was an area in which I had almost immediate success. At that time, it was easy to make a fast profit and I began to do well. People noticed me. You could not be a successful black person in Britain without standing out, and as I moved up the ladder, more and more businessmen wanted to be seen with me, to pretend that they were my friends. People liked inviting me to dinner parties. They thought of me as a bit of a character—particularly after my brief fame in the boxing ring.

“I made a large donation to the Conservative party, and as a result I was asked if I would like to become a prospective member of Parliament. I accepted and I was duly voted in, even though the seat had been Labour for as long as anyone could remember. Success followed success, Alex. I became a junior minister in the department of sport. I would often find myself on the terrace outside the House of Commons, sipping champagne with the prime minister. The entire cabinet came to my Christmas parties, which became famous for their fine vintage wine and chicken pies. I gave talks all over the country. And, thanks to my property empire, I was getting richer than ever. I still remember buying my first Rolls-Royce. At the time, I couldn't even drive—but what did I care? The next day I went out and hired a chauffeur. By the time I was thirty, I had a dozen people working for me.”

He spread his hands. “And then it all went wrong again.”

“You were sent to prison for fraud.” Alex remembered what Sabina's father had said.

“Yes. Isn't it amazing how quickly people desert you? Without a moment's hesitation, my so-called friends turned their backs on me. I was thrown out of Parliament. All my wealth was taken from me.

Journalists in the main newspapers jeered and mocked me in a way that was every bit as bad as the boys I had once known at school. In prison, I was beaten up so often that the hospital reserved a bed for me. Other men would have chosen to end it all, Alex—and there were times when even I considered dashing my head against a concrete wall. But I didn't—because already I was planning my comeback. I knew that I could use my disgrace as just one more step on the journey I had been born to make.”

“You didn't convert to Christianity,” Alex said. “You just pretended.”

McCain laughed. “Of course! I read the Bible. I spent hours talking to the prison chaplain, a pompous

fool who couldn't see farther than the end of his own dog collar. I took a course on the Internet and got myself ordained. The Reverend Desmond McCain! It was all lies ... but it was necessary. Because I had worked out what I was going to do next. I was going to be rich again. Fifty times richer than I had ever been before.”

Alex had left most of his food. One of the guards came over and took the plates away, removing McCain's unfinished food. Another brought over a basket of fruit. In the brief silence, Alex listened to the sounds of the night: the soft murmur of the river as it flowed past, the endless whisper of the undergrowth, the occasional cry of some animal far away. He was sitting in the open air, in Africa! And yet he couldn't enjoy his surroundings. He was sitting at a table with a madman. He knew it all too well. McCain might have suffered hardships in his life, but what had happened to him had nothing to do with his background or his color; they were convenient excuses now. He had been a psychopath from the start.

“Charity,” McCain said. “A very wise man once defined charity in the following way. He said it was poor people in rich countries giving money to rich people in poor countries.” He smiled at the thought.

“Well, I have been thinking a lot about charity, Alex—and in particular how to use it for my own ends.”

For a moment he looked up at the night sky, his eyes fixed on the full moon. “And in less than twenty-four hours, my moment will come. The seeds have already been sown ... and I mean that quite literally.”

“I know what you're doing,” Alex interrupted. “You're faking some sort of disaster. You're going to steal the money for yourself.”

“Oh—no, no, no,” McCain replied. He lowered his head and gazed at Alex. “The disaster is going to be quite real. It's going to happen here in Kenya and very soon. Thousands of people are going to die, I'm afraid. Men, women, and children. And let me tell you something rather disturbing. I really want you to know this.

“I can see the way you're looking at me, Alex. The contempt in your eyes. I'm used to it. I've had it all my life. But when the dying begins—and it will be very soon—just remember. It wasn't me who started it.”

He paused. And somehow Alex knew what he was going to say next.

“It was you.”

Chapter 19: ALL FOR CHARITY

THE GUARDS HAD SERVED COFFEE and McCain had lit a cigarette. Watching the gray smoke trickle out of the corner of his mouth, Alex was reminded of a gangster in an old black-and-white film.

As far as he was concerned, the habit couldn't kill McCain quickly enough.

McCain stirred his coffee with a second silver straw. The night had become very still, as if even the animals out in the bush had decided to listen in. The breeze had dropped and the air was heavy and warm.

“There are two ways to become rich,” McCain began again. “You can persuade one person to give you a lot of money—but that means finding someone who is wealthy and stupid enough in the first place, and it may involve criminal violence. Or you can ask a great many people to give you a little money.

This was the thought that obsessed me while I was in prison, and it was there that I came up with my idea. It was easy enough to fake my conversion to Christianity. Everyone likes a sinner who repents.

And it certainly impressed the parole board. I was released a long time before I had completed my sentence and I immediately set up my charity, First Aid. The aim, as I described it, was to be the first organization to respond to disasters wherever they took place.

“I would imagine that you know very little about international charity, Alex. But when a catastrophe occurs—the Asian tsunami in 2004 is a good example—people all over the world rush to respond. Old-age pensioners dip into their savings. Ten dollars here, twenty dollars there. It soon adds up. At the same time, banks and businesses fight to outdo each other with very public displays of generosity.

None of them really care about people dying in undeveloped countries. Some donate because they feel guilty about their own wealth. Others, as I say, do it for the publicity—”

“I don't agree with you,” Alex cut in. He was thinking of Brookland School and the money they had collected for Comic Relief. There had been a whole week of activities and everyone had been proud of what they had achieved. “You see the world this way because you're greedy and mad. People give to charity because they want to help.”

“Your opinions mean nothing to me,” McCain snapped, and Alex was pleased to see that he was annoyed. The anger was pricking at his eyes. “And if you interrupt again, I'll have you tied down and beaten.” He leaned forward and sucked at his coffee. “The motives are irrelevant anyway. What counts is the money. Six hundred million dollars was raised for the tsunami in the United Kingdom alone. It's very difficult to say what a charity like Oxfam raises over a period of twelve months, but I can tell you that last year they raised the same figure—six hundred million in Great Britain. That was just one office. Oxfam also has branches in a dozen other countries and subbranches in places like India and Mexico. You do the math!”

McCain fell silent. For a moment, his eyes were far away.

“Millions and millions of dollars and pounds and Euros,” he murmured. “And because the cash comes so quickly and in such large amounts, it is almost impossible to follow. An ordinary business has accountants. But a charity operates in many countries, often in appalling conditions—which makes it much less easy to pin down.”

“So basically you’re just a common thief,” Alex said. He knew he was treading close to the line, but he couldn’t resist needling McCain. “You’re planning to steal a lot of money.”

McCain nodded. Surprisingly, he didn’t seem to be offended. “I am a thief. But not a common one at all. I am the greatest thief who ever lived. And I do not need to take the money. People give it to me willingly.”

“You said you were going to create a disaster.”

“I’m glad you were listening. That is exactly what I am going to do ... or perhaps I should say it is exactly what I have done. What *we* have done. The disaster is already happening, even as we sit here in this pleasant night air.”

He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another.

“People need a reason to give money, and my genius, if you will forgive the word, has simply been to work out that the reason can be created, artificially. I can give you an example. A serious accident took place last year at the Jowada nuclear power station in Chennai, southern India. You may remember reading about it in the newspapers. That was a fairly simple matter, a bomb carried into the plant by one of my operatives. I have to say that the results were disappointing. The full force of the blast and the resulting radioactivity were contained and did less damage than I had hoped. But even so, First Aid was the first on the scene and received more than two million dollars in donations. Some of it, of course, we had to give away. We had to buy large quantities of some sort of antiradiation drug, and we had to pay for advertising. Even so, we made a tax-free profit of about eight hundred thousand dollars.

It was a useful dress rehearsal for the event I was planning here, in Kenya. It also helped us with our operating costs.”

“And what are you planning here? What do you mean when you say I started it?”

“We’ll come back to you in a minute, Alex. But what I am planning here is a good old-fashioned plague. Not just in Kenya, but in Uganda and Tanzania too. I am talking about a disaster on a scale never seen before. And the beauty of it is that I am completely in control. But I don’t need to describe it to you. I can show you. I am, as you will see, one step ahead of the game.”

McCain opened his laptop computer and spun it around so that Alex could see the screen. “When the disaster begins, a few weeks from now, other charities will rush to the scene. In a sense, all charities are waiting for bad things to happen. It is the reason for their existence. We need to be faster than them.

The first on the ground will scoop the lion’s share of the money. So we have already prepared our appeal ...”

He pressed the Enter button.

A film began to play on the computer. Slowly, the camera zoomed in on an African village. At first, everything seemed normal. But then Alex heard the buzz of flies and saw the first dead bodies. A couple of cows lay on their sides with bloated stomachs and rigid, distended legs. The camera passed an eagle which seemed to have crash-landed, slamming into the dust. And at the same time, he heard a voice speaking in a soft, urgent tone.

“Something terrible is happening in Kenya,” the commentary began. “A dreadful plague has hit the land and nobody knows how it began. But people are dying. In the thousands. The oldest and the youngest have been the first to go ...”

Now the camera had reached the first child, staring up with empty eyes.

“Animals are not immune. African wildlife is being decimated. This beautiful country is in the grip of a nightmare and we urgently need money, now, to save it before it’s too late. First Aid is running emergency food supplies. First Aid is already on the ground with vital medicine and fresh water. First Aid is funding urgent scientific research to find the cause of this disaster and to bring it to an end. But we cannot do it without you. Please send as much as you can today.

“Call us or visit our website. Our lines are open twenty-four hours a day. Save Kenya. Save the people.

How can we ignore their cry for help?”

The final image showed a giraffe stretched out in the grass with part of its rib cage jutting through its side. A telephone number and a web address were printed over them with the First Aid logo below.

“I am particularly pleased with the giraffe,” McCain said. He tapped the keyboard and froze the picture. “Many people in the first world just look away when a child or an old woman dies in the street.

But they’ll weep over a dead animal. A great many giraffes and elephants will die in Kenya in the next few months. It should double the amount we receive.”

Alex sat in silence. Everything that McCain was saying sickened him. But it was worse than that. He knew exactly what he was looking at. The African village on the screen. He had been there. He had stood in the same village when he had broken into the Elm’s Cross film studio. The only thing that was different was the backdrop. The green cyclorama was gone, replaced by swirling clouds and forest.

“You’ve made it all up,” he gasped. “It’s all fake. You built the village. It’s a set.”

“We were merely preparing ourselves for the reality,” McCain explained. “As soon as the first reports of the Kenyan plague hit the press, we will come forward with our television appeal. There will be advertisements in all the newspapers and on posters. This will happen not just in England but in America, Australia, another dozen countries. And then we will sit back and wait for the money to flood in.”

“And you’re going to keep it! You’re not going to help anyone!”

McCain smiled and blew smoke. “There’s nothing anyone can do,” he said. “Once the plague begins,

there will be no stopping it. I can tell you that with certainty because, of course, I created it.”

“Greenfields ...”

“Exactly. I wish my good friend Leonard Straik was here to explain the science of it, but I’m afraid he met with an accident and won’t be joining us. You could say he choked on a snail. Except the snail in question was the marbled cone variety and deadly poisonous. I have a feeling that Leonard’s heart had exploded before I forced it down his throat.”

So McCain had murdered Straik. Presumably, he didn’t want to share his profits with anyone. Alex filed the information away. He had to find a way to contact MI6.

“It works like this,” McCain explained. He was enjoying himself and he didn’t try to hide it. “You don’t seem to have spent a lot of time at school, Alex, but can I assume you’ve heard of genes? Every single cell in your body has about thirty thousand of them—and they are basically tiny pieces of code that make you what you are. The color of your hair, your eyes, and so on. It’s all down to the genes.

“Plants are made up of genes too. The genes tell the plant what to do ... whether to taste nice or not, for example. Now, what Mr. Straik and his friends at Greenfields were doing was changing the nature of plants by effectively adding a single gene. Plants are more complicated than you might think. For example, the information required to make a single stalk of wheat would take up one hundred books with one thousand pages each. And here’s the remarkable thing. If you added just one paragraph of new information—the equivalent of an extra gene—you would change the entire library. Your wheat might still look like wheat, but it would be very different. It might not be quite so tasty, for example, if eaten with milk and sugar for breakfast. It might, in fact, kill you.

“Do you see where I’m going with this? I’m talking about taking something very ordinary and agreeable and turning it into something lethal. And this actually happens in every kitchen in the world almost every day of the week! Only, in reverse. Let me try to explain it to you.

“I’m sure you enjoy potatoes. Young boys like you eat them all the time ... as chips or as fries. It probably never occurs to you that you are actually eating a poisonous plant. Not many people realize that the potato is closely related to deadly nightshade. Its leaves and flowers are extremely toxic. They won’t kill you, but they would make you very sick indeed. What you actually eat is the tuber, the bit that grows underground.

“The tubers, of course, are delicious—but they can also be made to harm you. If you leave them out in the sun, even for one day, they turn green and taste bitter. If you eat them after that, you will be sick.

And why has this happened? There’s a gene—a genetic switch—hidden inside the potato tuber. It’s completely harmless and almost invisible—but the sunlight seeks it out and turns it on. And once that happens, the potato tuber behaves differently. It goes green. It becomes poisonous. You have to throw it away.

“For the last five years, Greenfields Bio Center has been supplying seed to grow wheat in several African countries. The wheat has been genetically modified to need less water and to produce extra vitamins. But what nobody knows is that Leonard Straik used his particle delivery system to add an extra gene to the package. Like the potato gene I just told you about, it’s harmless. A loaf of Kenyan

bread made out of home-grown Kenyan wheat will be fine. But once the genetic switch has been activated, although the wheat will look exactly the same, it will begin to change. It will quietly produce a toxin known as ricin. Ricin normally grows in castor beans and is one of the most lethal substances known to man. A tiny capsule of the stuff would kill an adult. And very soon it will be growing all over Africa.”

“That stuff I found in your office,” Alex muttered. “In the test tube ...”

“You’re very quick,” McCain said. “The more I get to know you, Alex, the more I like you. Yes. That is our activating agent. It is a sort of mushroom soup. And this is very important. It’s not a chemical, it’s a living organism—which is to say it can reproduce itself.

“Again, I can explain this to you by taking you back to the kitchen. If you place an ordinary mushroom on a piece of paper and leave it overnight, you’ll notice a blackish sort of dust covering the surface the next day. What you are looking at are spores. If they are released outside, the spores will spread—a little bit like the common cold, traveling from one field to another. It may interest you to know that the Irish Potato Blight of 1845, which caused the death by starvation of almost a million people, was caused by a spore attacking the potato crop.

“I can see from your face that you’re beginning to understand the exact purpose of the flight that you took this morning. You were kind enough to help Dr. Beckett by pulling a lever inside the Piper Cub, and when you did this, you sprayed a single field of genetically modified wheat with the activating agent. Leonard Straik told me that it would take exactly thirty-six hours for the reaction to occur. So, at sunset tomorrow, the genetic switch will be thrown and the wheat in the field will begin to produce ricin. But that will only be the start of it. Once the spores have done their work, they will move on. The wind will carry them to the next field and to the one after that. Nothing will be able to stop them.

Nothing will stand in their way.

“The birds will be the first to die. A little peck of poisoned wheat and they’ll look like the plastic eagle you saw in that film. Then it will be the turn of the people. It’s hard to believe that a loaf of bread in the local baker’s or wrapped in plastic on a supermarket shelf will contain enough poison to kill an entire family. But it will. It will have become a slice of death. Animals will die too. It will be as if God has passed judgment on the whole of Kenya.

“Except that it won’t stop at the borders. Greenfields has sold millions of seeds to the African people

..

. in Uganda, Tanzania, and all around. Soon the contamination will have spread across the whole continent.”

“They’ll realize,” Alex said. “People will know that the wheat is poisoned and they’ll stop eating it. They’ll burn the fields.”

“That’s exactly right, Alex. It will all be over very quickly. It won’t even make a great economic difference to Kenya. They only grow 135,000 tons of wheat a year, and a lot of their food is imported. But that’s why First Aid has to act fast. It’ll be in the initial panic, the first weeks, that we’ll make our

billions. First Aid will publicize the catastrophe to the world, and people will rush to give money without thinking. And what do you think they'll do when they discover that it's only the wheat that has mysteriously developed this sickness, that the plague can be contained? Do you think they'll ask for their donations back? I don't think so.

"And anyway, it will be too late. By then, I will have moved to Switzerland. I already have a new identity waiting for me. I will have plastic surgery ... this time, I think, more successfully. I will reemerge as a slightly mysterious billionaire businessman, but I don't think people will ask too many questions about who I am or where I've come from. I already discovered this when I was partying in politics. When you are rich, people treat you with respect."

McCain fell silent. He had completed his explanation and sat back, almost exhausted, waiting for Alex to respond. There was a sudden hiss as one of the logs in the fire collapsed in on itself and a flurry of sparks leapt into the night air. The guards had disappeared from sight, but Alex knew they would be watching and would come in an instant if they were needed. He felt sick. It had been a final twist, a little act of extra cruelty to make him pull the lever that had released the spores. There had been no real reason for it. It was just how McCain and his fiancée got their kicks.

"So what happens next?" he asked. "What do you want with me?"

"Is that all you want to know? Haven't you got anything to say about my plan?"

"I think your plan is as sick as you are, Mr. McCain. I'm not interested in it. I'm not interested in you. I just want to know why I'm here."

Perhaps McCain had been expecting applause or at least some sort of reaction from Alex; he was clearly disappointed, and when he spoke, his voice was sullen. "Very well," he said. "I might as well tell you."

He had finished his second cigarette. He ground that out too.

"I have been thinking a great deal, Alex, about how you managed to cross my path on two occasions.

The first time was at Kilmore Castle in Scotland. You were with the journalist Edward Pleasure. Why were you there?"

"I'm a friend of his daughter." Alex couldn't see any harm in admitting the truth. "He invited me."

McCain considered for a moment. "Pure coincidence, then. Unfortunately for you, I was concerned about Pleasure," he continued. "I had been warned that he might be dangerous and I wondered how much he knew about me. I only agreed to be interviewed by him because to have refused might have raised his suspicions. And then, when I heard the two of you talking about genetic engineering—"

"You thought he was talking about his article?" Alex almost wanted to laugh. "I was telling him about my homework! He'd asked me how I was doing at school!"

"I believe you, Alex. But at the time, I couldn't take any chances. If Pleasure had found out about my involvement with Greenfields, he would have put this entire operation in jeopardy."

"So you decided to kill him. You had one of your people shoot out his tire."

“Actually, Myra did it for me. She was there too that night. Of course, there was a certain risk attached.

But as I have already told you, I am something of a gambler. Perhaps that’s why I allowed myself to lose my temper when you managed to beat me at cards.”

He lifted a hand and waved. It was a signal. Two guards, both carrying rifles, began to approach the table. Beckett was with them.

“The first time we met may have been a coincidence,” McCain said. “The second time most definitely was not. You were sent to Greenfields by MI6. There is no point in attempting to deny it. You were carrying equipment that allowed you to jam the surveillance camera, and you also exploded a chimney on the recycling unit roof. It is therefore absolutely critical for me to discover how much the intelligence services know about me and in particular about this operation. In short, I need to know why you were at Greenfields. How much of my conversation with Leonard Straik did you overhear?

What were you able to tell MI6?”

Alex was about to speak, but McCain held up a hand, stopping him. Beckett and the two guards had reached the table. They were standing behind Alex, waiting to escort him back to his tent.

“I do not want to hear any more from you tonight,” McCain said. “It is already clear to me that you are brave and intelligent. It is quite possible that you would be able to deceive me. So I want you to consider the questions I have asked you. I will ask them again in the morning.

“But the next time I put them to you, it will not be over a pleasant dinner.” McCain leaned forward, and Alex saw the ferocity in his eyes. “ ‘Behold, I have the keys of hell and death,’ as it says in the book of Revelation. Tomorrow, I intend to torture you, Alex. I want you to sleep tonight in the knowledge that when the sun rises, I am going to inflict terror on you such as you have never known in your life. I am going to strip you of your courage and your bravado so that when you open your mouth and speak to me, you will tell me everything I want to know and won’t even contemplate lying. Over this table, you have made some jokes at my expense, but you will not be making jokes when we meet again. You must be prepared to shed tears, Alex. Leave me now. And try to imagine, if you will, the horror that awaits you.”

Alex felt the two men grab hold of his arms. He shrugged them off and stood up.

“You can do what you like to me, Mr. McCain,” he said. “But your plan will never work. MI6 will find you and they’ll kill you. I expect they’re already on their way.”

“You’re right about one thing,” McCain replied. “I can do anything I like to you. And very soon I will.

Good night, Alex. I’ll leave you to your dreams.”

Alex was taken away. The last thing he saw was Myra Beckett standing behind McCain, massaging his shoulders. McCain himself was leaning forward with his elbows on the table, his hands in front of his face. He looked very much as if he was at prayer.

Chapter 20: PURE TORTURE

THE SUN ROSE ALL TOO SOON.

Barely able to sleep, Alex watched the sides of his tent turn gray, silver, then finally a dirty yellow as the morning light intensified. He had lost his watch and he had no idea of the time, but being so close to the equator, he suspected the sun was up early here. When would they come for him? Exactly what sort of torture did McCain have in mind?

He lay back and closed his eyes, trying to fight off the demons of fear and despair. The fact was that he was completely in McCain's power. And McCain wasn't taking any chances; two Kikuyu guards had stood watch outside his tent all night. He had heard them murmuring in low voices and had seen the occasional flare of a match as they lit cigarettes. Once, he thought he had heard a plane flying low overhead, but apart from that there had been nothing except the usual eternal sounds of the bush. Alex had been left entirely on his own, unable to sleep. Right now, he was close to exhaustion. He could see no way out.

The sun was getting stronger by the minute. Alex thought of it beating down in the Simba Valley, just two miles to the north. The wheat would be growing taller, turning gold. And the deadly spores that he himself had released would be activating themselves. By the end of the day, they would have begun to spread, lifted by the breeze, carrying poison and death all over Africa. Alex's eyes flicked open and suddenly he was angry. Why was he wasting time and energy worrying about himself when, in a few hours, an entire continent might begin to die?

Without any warning, the flap of the tent opened and Myra Beckett stepped inside, dressed in white with a round straw hat—the sort of thing a schoolgirl might have worn a hundred years ago. She had clipped two dark lenses over her spectacles to protect herself from the sun's glare. They made her look less human and more robotic than ever.

She was obviously surprised to see Alex lying on the bed, seemingly relaxed. “How did you sleep?” she asked.

“I slept very well, thank you,” Alex lied. “Have you brought my breakfast?”

The woman scowled. “I think you will find you *are* the breakfast.” She gestured at the exit. “Desmond is waiting. Let me show you the way ...”

It was another beautiful day with just a few wisps of cloud in an otherwise perfect sky. There was a familiar chatter above Alex's head and he looked up to see that at least one monkey had dared to come back, looking down on him with shock-filled eyes as if it knew what was about to happen. Birds with long tails and brilliant plumage hopped along the pathways. There would have been a time when tourists would have woken up to this scenery and thought themselves in heaven. But one sight of the glowering guards reminded Alex. McCain had turned it into his own peculiar version of hell.

“It's not very far,” Beckett said. “Please, follow me.”

She led him out of the camp, away from the landing strip, and also away from the open area where he

had eaten the night before. Alex was still wearing part of his school uniform—the shirt, pants, and shoes. Even with his sleeves rolled up, he was still too warm and sweaty, but they hadn't bothered to give him any fresh clothes. He had just one crumb of comfort. The gel-ink pen was in his pants pocket.

Even now he might get a chance to use it. He had no other surprises left.

With two guards behind him and the woman a few steps ahead, he was taken down a path that followed the edge of the river. The camp disappeared behind them, and looking ahead in the far distance, Alex saw a family of elephants washing themselves in the sparkling water. It was an extraordinary sight, but Alex couldn't enjoy it. Not when it might be the last thing he ever saw.

Desmond McCain was waiting ahead of them, dressed comfortably in a well-tailored safari suit with a white silk neckerchief. It seemed they had arrived at their destination. Alex looked around him. He didn't like what he saw.

A steep slope ran down to a stretch of sandy shingle, a narrow beach at the very edge of the water.

There was a stepladder, about twenty feet high, standing on the beach, and above it a metal pipe that had been fastened to the branch of a tree. The pipe ended with two handles and reminded Alex of a periscope in a submarine. A wooden observation platform had been constructed at the top of the slope.

This was where McCain was standing.

Alex had already worked out what might be going on here and was making calculations. If he walked down to the beach and climbed the ladder, he would be able to reach the handles. Then the ladder could be taken away and he would be left hanging from the pipe. He would be close enough to the platform to be able to talk to McCain and to hear what he had to say—but not close enough to reach him.

Because the pipe was rigid, he wouldn't be able to swing back and forth. In other words, he would simply have to stay there until his arms grew tired and he dropped.

The question was—why? What was the point?

“This will not take very long, Alex,” McCain said. He had watched Alex taking everything in. “I will talk to you a little bit, and then, I'm afraid, we will begin. As I have already told you, I need most urgently the answer to three questions. What was it that brought you to Greenfields? Why did MI6 send you? And how much do the intelligence services know about Poison Dawn?”

Alex had already decided what he was going to say. “You don't need to play your sadistic games, Mr. McCain,” he said. “I'll tell you what you want to know anyway.”

McCain held up a hand. “I don't think you were listening to me last night. Of course you will tell me what I want to hear. That is the point I'm trying to make. You will tell me anything to protect yourself. But I have to be one hundred percent certain that you are telling me the truth. There cannot be even the tiniest margin of doubt.”

“And you think torturing me will achieve that?”

“Normally, no. There are many horrible things I could do to you, Alex. We have electricity here and wires attached to various parts of your body could produce excruciating pain. My Kikuyu friends could take you far beyond the limits of endurance using only their spears, perhaps heated first in the flames of a fire. We could cut pieces off of you. We could boil you alive. And do not think for a single minute that I would hesitate to do any of this because you are fourteen. MI6 clearly does not think of you as a child, so why should I?”

“Is part of the torture boring me to death?” Alex asked.

McCain nodded. “Bravely spoken, Alex. Let us see how brave you are ten minutes from now.” He took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. The sun was beating down on his bald head, and beads of sweat were standing out. “The pain that you are about to experience is going to be all the worse because you will inflict it on yourself. You will, as it were, cooperate with your torturers. And you will do so to escape the terror that lies below.” He took out a gun, an old-fashioned Mauser with a shortened barrel and a white ivory plate over the grip. It looked like something out of a museum. “I would like you now to go down to the river,” he explained. “If you refuse to do so, if you attempt to run away, I will shoot you through the knee.”

Alex stood where he was. Beckett was smiling properly for the first time, and he realized that she knew what to expect, that she had seen this all before. The two tribesmen were covering him with their rifles.

If McCain missed with his pistol, they would certainly gun him down before he'd taken a single step.

He glanced at the beach and at the river. There was nobody else down there. He had a nasty feeling he wasn't going to be alone for long.

“I'm waiting, Alex,” McCain said.

Without speaking, Alex made his way down the slope. Now McCain and the others were directly above him, looking down from the protected height of the observation platform. Alex was reminded of a Roman emperor and his entourage. They were in the royal box. He was the gladiator, about to entertain them.

“This is part of the River Simba,” McCain explained. “It runs all the way up to the Simba Dam and Lake Simba beyond. It is the water from this river that will be feeding my wheat field, Alex. And as you are about to learn, it is infested with crocodiles.”

“Here comes one now!” Beckett crowed.

Crocodiles.

Alex turned to see a dark shape on the opposite bank slither forward and launch itself into the water, followed quickly by a second. There was something strikingly evil about the way they moved. They twisted and sliced their way through the water like two knife wounds, and somehow they managed to swim—or slither—very quickly without seeming to be in a hurry. They would be across the river in less than a minute. They somehow knew he was here. But then, of course, they had been fed this way before. And Alex had a feeling they were hungry.

Alex looked up. Beckett was gazing at him with her mouth open, and he could see the saliva glistening on her lips and tongue. McCain was next to her, his gun held loosely, watching with interest. He glanced back. The crocodiles were halfway across the river. His first instinct was to run, but he knew he would be shot if he tried. Nor would he be allowed back on the platform. Everything had been carefully arranged. There was only one way of escape.

Sick with himself, knowing that he was doing exactly what McCain wanted, Alex climbed the stepladder. He was trying not to panic, but now his every instinct was driving him up, out of harm's way. As he drew nearer to the top, he felt the whole structure tremble underneath him and for one terrible moment he thought he was going to fall. Somehow, he managed to steady himself. He reached the top even as the first crocodile heaved itself out of the water and began to crawl toward him.

Alex turned back and looked at it. It was a mistake. In an instant he felt the terror that McCain had promised him, the deep-rooted fear of this ancient monster that had to be hot-wired into every human being. The crocodile that had just emerged was almost twice his own size, from the ugly snout to the writhing tip of its tail. Its great mouth was open, with two lines of ferocious white teeth waiting to snap shut on his arm or leg. That was how they operated, of course, clamping down on their victim and then dragging them back into the water. And only when the bones were loose and the flesh had begun to decompose would they begin their feast.

But worst of all were the eyes, midnight black, snake-like, and swollen on the side of its head, surely too small for its body and filled with hatred. They really were the eyes of death. Alex had heard it said that crocodiles wept as they attacked their prey, but there would be no pity in those eyes. They were part of a machine that existed only to kill.

The second crocodile was a little smaller and much quicker. Alex saw it overtake the other, scuttling over the shingle on its short, squat legs, all the way to the foot of the ladder.

He climbed the last few steps, using his hands to steady himself at the top. If he fell! ... He could imagine it. Smashing into the shingle. Perhaps breaking an ankle or a leg. And then being torn apart between the two animals as they fought over him. There could be no more horrible death.

The crocodile threw itself at the ladder and the whole thing shuddered. How many people had McCain terrorized in this way? He looked up. He still wasn't level with the observation platform. He knew what he had to do. With dreadful care, he balanced himself on the highest step. The handles at the end of the pipe were directly above him. Swaying, using his arms to steady himself, he reached up and grabbed hold of them. His fingers closed around them even as the larger crocodile reared up, throwing its entire weight against the ladder. The whole thing came crashing down. Alex was left dangling in space.

And now he saw how McCain had arranged things.

He was facing McCain, the two of them level with each other, no more than a yard apart. The two crocodiles were directly underneath Alex, climbing on top of each other, snapping at the air. For the moment he was safe. But he was stretched out, hanging in space, clinging to the pipe by his fingers. His wrists and arms were already feeling the strain as they supported his entire body weight, and the burn of lactic acid was building up in his shoulders. It was just as McCain had said. He was actually

inflicting the pain on himself, and it would get worse the longer he hung there. In the end, of course, he would have to let go. And that was the horror of it. Once he dropped, there would only be more pain and then death. How long did he have?

“The longest anyone has ever remained where you are is eighteen minutes,” McCain said. He spoke slowly and evenly. He didn’t have to raise his voice to make himself heard. “The man in question had lost his sanity before the end. He was giggling as he fell. But you, Alex, you have one hope, one chance of survival. My men can shoot at the crocodiles and scare them away. But first you have to answer my questions, and you have to make me believe you. If you can make that happen, then you will be safe.”

Alex swore. It was difficult to speak. All his concentration was fixed on his hands, the increasing pain in his arms, the need not to let go.

“I dislike that sort of language, Alex,” McCain said. “I am, after all, an ordained priest. Would you like me to go away for five minutes and come back when you’re in a better frame of mind?”

One of the crocodiles leapt toward him. Instinctively, Alex pulled his legs up, curving them in toward his stomach. The movement put extra strain on his arms, but he actually heard the jaws of the animal snap together and he knew there were mere inches between it and his ankles.

“No,” he shouted. His voice was strangled. He didn’t sound like himself. But he had to get this over with. “Ask me what you want.”

He had been hanging for less than a minute. It already felt longer. He would never manage another five, let alone another seventeen. In his desperation, he found himself twisting around. His wrists crossed and he had to jerk his body to bring himself face-to-face with McCain.

“The first question, then.” McCain paused. He was speaking deliberately slowly. He knew that every second only added to the torture. “Why were you at Greenfields?”

“It was a school trip.”

“You’re still lying to me, Alex. I’m going to leave you for a little while ...” McCain turned his back on Alex and walked away. Below, on the beach, the crocodiles were writhing together in a frenzy of claws and scales and black eyes and teeth.

“It’s the truth!” Alex shouted after him. His hands were sweating, making it even more difficult to keep his grip. “It was a biology project for my teacher Mr. Gilbert. But then MI6 asked me to help them.

They weren’t interested in you. It was Leonard Straik.”

McCain turned back. “Go on.”

“There was someone in Greenfields. An informer ...” What was his name? Alex thought back desperately. “Philip Masters. He’d gone to the police and then he was killed. That was why they wanted to find out about Straik.”

“You broke into his computer.”

“They gave me a memory stick. That was all they asked me to do.”

“What about Poison Dawn?”

“They never said anything about Poison Dawn. They never even mentioned it to me. I’m telling you, they only knew about you and Straik when I told them I’d seen you together.”

“That was very unfortunate. What else did you tell them?”

“I told them I heard the two of you talking ... but you didn’t say anything that made any sense. I gave them the stuff I found in Straik’s office.” To Alex, it was as if his arms were being torn out of his shoulders. He could feel his body hanging in space. He didn’t dare look at the crocodiles below. “But I never even spoke to them again. I don’t know what they know. They don’t know anything else... .”

McCain let him dangle in silence. Ten seconds dragged to twenty and then to half a minute. Alex felt every one of them. He could feel his bones wrenching in their sockets and knew that McCain was doing this on purpose. He was staring straight into Alex’s eyes as if trying to read what was going on inside his mind. Alex tried to ease his grip, but his palms were so slippery that the smallest movement could make him fall. Beckett had moved closer to him. She was breathing heavily, watching Alex struggle with evident delight. He could see himself reflected in the dark circles of her glasses.

The silence stretched out. Alex could actually smell the crocodiles; a deep, sickly odor of stale fish and decaying meat that rose up and crept into his nostrils. He was finding it difficult to breathe. The pain was getting worse and worse. All the muscles in his upper body were burning.

“I believe you,” McCain said at last. “You are telling the truth.”

“Then get rid of them!” Alex jerked his head down at the two crocodiles. They were silent now, as if they knew it was only a matter of time before they were given what they wanted.

Another long pause. Alex’s arms screamed.

“I’m afraid not,” McCain said.

“What?” Alex shouted the word.

“You have annoyed me very much, Alex. I tried to kill you when you were in Scotland, and it would have been a lot better if I had. Your activity at Greenfields very nearly brought an end to an operation that has taken me five years and a great deal of money to develop. Thanks to you, my name is now known to MI6, and that will make my future life more difficult. And, added to that, you are a very rude and unpleasant boy, and all in all, I think you deserve to die.” He turned to Myra Beckett. “I know you enjoy this, my love, so you can stay to the end. I’ll be interested to know how many minutes he manages to hang on before he falls. I somehow doubt that he’ll beat the record.”

The woman took out her mobile phone. “I’ll take photographs for you, Dezzy.”

McCain took one last look at Alex. “I hope you die painfully,” he said. “Because although you have not lived long, I really think you deserve a painful death.”

He signaled to the guards and the three of them walked away. But he had given his gun to Beckett. She was holding it in one hand, the mobile phone in the other. Behind him, Alex heard a splash. A third

crocodile had launched itself into the river and was already wriggling its way across.

“Four minutes.” The woman glanced at her watch. “I do not think you will make it to five.”

And she was right. Everything was pain and with every second the pain was getting worse. Alex couldn't swing himself to safety. He couldn't climb. He couldn't move. He could only fall.

He closed his eyes and knew that very soon he would do just that.

Chapter 21: RAW DEAL

SEVEN MINUTES. MAYBE EIGHT MINUTES. Alex wasn't even sure why he was hanging on anymore. The sooner he dropped, the sooner it would all be over. His whole body was racked by pain and his blood was pounding in his ears and behind his eyes. With every second that passed, the strength was draining out of his arms. He tried to accept what was about to happen: his fingers slipping out of the metal handles, the short fall down to the riverbank, the jarring impact, and then the final horror as the crocodiles attacked.

Myra Beckett leaned forward. "Do you have any last words?" she asked. "Any good-byes you want to make? I can record them for you." She held out her mobile phone.

"Go rot in hell." Alex's eyes felt as if they were swollen shut, but he forced them open, staring straight at her.

"You are the one on the way to hell, my dear," she said.

Her eyes widened. She took a step forward as if something had surprised her. Once again she opened her mouth and Alex thought she was about to speak, but instead, a stream of blood poured over her lower lip. A moment later, she pitched forward and fell and Alex glimpsed the hilt of a knife jutting out of the back of her neck. Desperately clinging onto the handles, he cork-screwed around and looked down. The woman had landed in the middle of the crocodiles. She was still alive. He heard her scream as she was torn apart, her arms and legs being pulled in three directions. He turned away. He couldn't watch any more.

He was going to join her. His own strength was gone. He felt his fingers opening. But then suddenly there was a man on the observation platform, leaning out, reaching toward him, and even as he wondered where the man had come from, he knew that he had seen him somewhere before.

"Alex!" the man called. "Take my hand."

"I can't reach ..."

"One effort. You can make it."

The distance was too great. Alex would have to let go with one hand and throw himself sideways, reaching out with the other. If he miscalculated or if the man was tricking him, that would be it. The crocodiles would get a second feed.

"Now!" The man couldn't shout. They were too close to the lodge. His voice was an urgent whisper.

Alex did as he was told, stretching as far as he could, using every muscle to propel his body away from the handles. The man was leaning out. And somehow, just when Alex was certain he would fall, they managed to lock together, wrist in hand and hand over wrist.

"Okay. I've got you. I'll take your weight."

Alex let go of the handle. He felt the man pull him toward the platform. Even so, there was one

dreadful moment when he was sure they had overbalanced and they would fall together. He came crashing down. But he was right on the edge of the platform. He clawed at the wooden planks and managed to find some purchase. His legs were dangling below him, but then he pulled himself forward and rolled over on his side. He was lying next to the man who had just rescued him. He was safe.

For a few seconds he lay in silence, recovering his breath and waiting for his jangling nerves to calm down. Then he looked up. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Not now.” The man was Asian, young, with very dark skin and close-cropped hair, dressed in camouflage khakis with a harness for three knives slanting across his chest. One knife was missing.

Alex knew him at once. With a sense of astonishment he remembered where they had met before. It was the man from Loch Arkaig, the driver of the white van who had appeared from nowhere when he had crawled out of the freezing water. He had driven Alex, Sabina, and Edward Pleasure to the hospital.

And now he was here! What sort of guardian angel was he, operating on two sides of the world?

“My name is Rahim,” the man said. “But now we must leave. When they find the woman is missing, they will come looking for her. Here ... give me your shirt.”

Alex didn't know what the man was thinking, but this was no time for an argument. He stripped off his school shirt and handed it over. Rahim took out a second knife and cut the shirt to shreds, then tossed it down to the crocodiles. There were only two of them down there, fighting over what was left of the woman. The other had returned to the river, dragging part of her with it.

The pieces of Alex's shirt fluttered down onto the riverbank. “It may fool them,” Rahim said. “It may not. Let's go.”

“Go where?”

“I have a camp.”

Alex followed Rahim off the observation platform and away from the river, heading into the bush. He was alarmed to see that Rahim was limping badly and that the back of his jacket was covered in sweat.

The man had a fever. Alex had also seen it in his eyes. He was a soldier of some sort, extremely fit. But he was also hurt. It was only willpower that was keeping him going.

Even so, they kept up a fast pace for the next fifteen minutes, finally arriving at a clearing dominated by a huge *Kigelia africana*, or sausage tree, with its strange black pods hanging underneath the branches. This was where Rahim had set up a makeshift camp. Alex saw a backpack, a few tins of food, and—at least this answered one of his questions—a parachute made of black silk, bunched up and tucked under a bush. A very sophisticated-looking gun was leaning against the trunk of the tree. It was a Dragunov SVD99 gas-operated sniper rifle, built in Russia but used extensively by the Indian army.

Rahim went over to the backpack and took out a spare T-shirt. He threw it over to Alex. “Here. You can wear this.” He opened a water bottle and drank, then offered it to Alex. Alex took a swig. The

water was warm and tasted of chemicals.

“You were in Scotland,” Alex said.

“Yes.” Rahim had obviously been drained by what he had just been through. The sweat was pouring down his face and he was breathing heavily, fighting against the fever. Now Alex saw that one of his legs was bleeding. It was probably bandaged underneath his pants, but the blood was seeping through.

He sat down and began to untie his shoelaces. He was wearing heavy combat boots.

“How safe are we here?” Alex asked.

“Not safe. The Kikuyu will be able to track us. Maybe McCain will think you are dead. But he is already nervous. He will not take any chances.”

“You’re hurt.” Alex handed back the water bottle. “What can I do to help you?”

“I was unlucky.” Rahim drank a second time. “I parachuted in last night.” Alex remembered hearing a plane. It had passed over the safari lodge, flying close to the ground. “I landed badly in a thornbush and cut my leg open. The wound has become infected. But I have taken antibiotics and I will recover. There is nothing you can do.”

“You’ve told me your name, but you haven’t said why you’re here.” Rahim didn’t reply, but Alex had already worked it out for himself. “You were at Kilmore Castle, so you must be interested in McCain.”

Rahim nodded.

“Who are you working for?”

Rahim took a deep breath and shifted his position. The movement caused him pain. “I know who you are,” he said. “You are Alex Rider. You are a part-time operative working with the Special Operations Division of MI6. They are looking for you. They have put out the call to every intelligence department, including mine.”

“But you didn’t come here looking for me.”

“I did not expect to find you here, Alex.” Rahim smiled, and at that moment Alex saw how very young he was, perhaps only twenty-three or -four. There might be less than ten years between them. “I was sent here for one reason only. It was the same reason that I was sent to Kilmore Castle, and this is now the second time you have got in my way. I am here to kill Desmond McCain.”

“Why?” There were so many questions Alex wanted to ask, and he was aware of time ticking away.

The tribesmen could come looking for them at any time. But at least the rifle might put the odds more on their side.

Rahim took a plastic bottle out of his pocket. “I will tell you,” he said. He tipped two pills into the palm of his hand and swallowed them dry. He grimaced. “I am a spy like you, Alex. I belong to a division of the Indian secret service called RAW. It stands for Research and Analysis Wing, and it deals in counterterrorism, foreign affairs, and covert action. My own department goes further than that. Our activities often come under a single word. Revenge.”

“This is about the nuclear power station,” Alex said. “The one that McCain tried to destroy.”

Rahim nodded. “The Jowada facility in Chennai. We know that he bribed a man by the name of Ravi Chandra to carry a device into the building. It was a lamentable lapse in security, but the security at Jowada was in general a disgrace. Unfortunately, we were unable to question Chandra because he died in the initial explosion. McCain took a great deal of care. There were a number of connections between him and the man who paid Chandra, but we investigated, and in the end we found a link with First Aid.

Suddenly everything made sense. Even so, we cannot prove the case against McCain, nor do we need to. Sometimes RAW deals with its enemies in a simpler and more direct way. I was sent to Scotland to kill him there, and I was checking out the castle when your car went off the road and into the lake. That was fortunate for you. And it is even more fortunate that I should be here a second time. That business with the crocodiles ...” Rahim gave Alex the ghost of a smile. “I have never seen anything like that.”

“How were you going to kill him?” Alex asked.

“I was planning to shoot him, but as I discovered last night, that will not be as easy as I thought. He is well protected by his Kikuyus. However, I have come well prepared. I can also blow up his plane.”

“You have plastic explosive?”

“Of course.” Rahim gestured at his backpack. “McCain flies a four-seater 172 Skyhawk.”

Alex nodded grimly. “I know. That’s what brought me here.”

“I will blow it up in midair. In a way, that is the better option. It is part of my brief that RAW should not be seen to have been involved. A bomb, I think, will be more anonymous than a bullet casing.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to think again, Rahim.” Alex went over to the Indian agent and sat down next to him. His thoughts had already raced ahead. “I have to contact MI6,” he said.

“You want to let them know you are safe.”

“More than that. Do you have a radio?”

“I have a laptop equipped with a demodulator. It will produce a baseband output that can be picked up by satellite. Do you have an address?”

“No.” It only occurred to Alex now. Even after all the missions he had undertaken for MI6, they had never given him an e-mail address or a telephone number. On the other hand, he’d been supplied with gadgets. What had happened to the pocket calculator with the built-in communications system? It was a shame it hadn’t been in his pocket when he was snatched.

“It’s not a problem,” Rahim said. “We can contact the Intelligence Bureau in New Delhi. They will pass on any message to Liverpool Street. What is it you want to say?”

Quickly, Alex told Rahim everything that he had learned from Desmond McCain the night before ... the genetically modified wheat crop, the spores, the plan to poison half the continent. “We have less

time than you thought,” he said. “And killing McCain right now isn’t going to do anyone any good. We have to go up to the Simba Valley. It’s only two miles from here.”

Rahim shook his head. “I’m sorry, Alex. I don’t have enough explosive to blow up an entire wheat field.”

“That’s not my idea.” Alex was remembering what McCain had told him, and what he had seen for himself when he was flown in. “There’s a place called the Simba Dam,” he explained. “It’s on the edge of a big lake. If we could blow it up, we could flood the valley. We could put the whole crop underwater before it has a chance to do any harm. But we have to do it today. Right now. McCain said that the spores would start working at sunset. It must be about midday now.”

“Alex, I know this dam,” Rahim said. “I studied the whole area before I parachuted. It is what is known as a double curvature arch dam ... which is to say that it curves against the side of the valley and also against the valley floor, making it doubly strong. I have just one kilogram of plastic explosive.

That would not be nearly enough even to make a crack in the wall.”

“There must be some sort of pipe or valve—”

“There will be a whole series of pipes carrying the water down the hill. Simba Dam is used for irrigation purposes, but there are also two hydroelectric turbines.” Alex was impressed. Rahim had clearly done his homework. “It might be possible to attack the bottom outlet valve or the scour valve that is next to it. Either of them would release enormous amounts of water.” He shook his head. “But it cannot be done.”

“Why not?”

“Because I cannot do it. My leg is infected. I was barely able to limp to the river. The Simba Dam is three miles from here.”

“I could go on my own.”

“That I will not allow.”

Alex thought for a minute. “You parachuted in,” he said. “How were you planning to leave?”

“McCain has a crop duster as well as the Skyhawk. I imagine he used it to spread this spore of his that you described? I can fly. I was intending to steal it.”

“Then you could fly me to the dam?”

“There is nowhere to land. I might be able to slow the plane to as little as thirty-five miles per hour and fly low over the water to allow you to jump, but even so, the chances are high that you would be killed.”

For a moment, Alex lost his temper. “We can’t just sit back and do nothing!”

“No, Alex. We can contact the Intelligence Bureau as I have already suggested. They will, in turn, speak to the British authorities. Together they will know what to do.” Rahim went on quickly, before

Alex could interrupt him. “I have my instructions. I am here to kill McCain. I was acting improperly when I decided to rescue you, and I can assure you my superiors will not be amused when I make my report.” He broke off. He was sweating again and his eyes were unfocused. Alex could almost see the disease attacking his system. “My laptop ...” Rahim pointed at the backpack. He was too weak to go over himself.

Alex stood up. He went over to the backpack and opened. Everything was packed very neatly inside.

There was a laptop computer, maps, a compass, ammunition for the Dragunov, medical supplies, spare clothes, and food. Much of the space was taken up by a silver box about the size of a car battery with two switches and a clock set behind glass. Alex knew at once what it was. Rahim must have been planning to conceal it in the Skyhawk’s hold.

“Bring it to me,” Rahim said.

Alex left the bomb and carried the computer over. Rahim opened it, booted it up, and then handed it across. “It will be easier if you do it,” he said. “But I suggest you don’t take too long. We will have to move from this place before the Kikuyu come looking for us, and I need to break into the Cessna and prepare it for its last flight.”

Alex crouched down. It felt weird to be tapping away at a keyboard, sitting in the dust in the middle of the African bush. He also wondered what the British or the Indian authorities would be able to do.

Another six hours and it might be too late. He briefly outlined the location of the valley, the crop that McCain was growing there, his plan to bring famine and disease to Kenya. Finally, he added a *PS*.

**Please let Jack Starbright know where I am
and tell her I’m all right.**

If there was one good thing to come out of all this, at least Jack would know that he hadn’t been hurt.

He quickly read the page over and pressed Send.

He looked up. Rahim had slumped forward. Alex went over and examined him. The RAW agent wasn’t exactly asleep. He was unconscious, breathing heavily. He had been knocked out—either by the fever or by the medicine he had been taking to fight it. Alex eased him gently to the ground, then looked back in the direction of the lodge. Everything was silent in the bush as even the animals slept in the midday sun. It was very hot, but at least Rahim was tucked away in the shade of the sausage tree.

What would MI6 do when they received the news?

Alex had visions of Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones conferring with the appropriate ministers at Downing Street. A new government had recently been voted in. They probably wouldn’t even know he existed, so they would have to be persuaded he was reliable, that his information was accurate. And then they would have to make a decision ... but what exactly were their options? They could send in troops with flamethrowers, but that might take days. In fact, Alex couldn’t even be certain that the Indian

secret service would pass the message on in time. After all, they had their own agenda. They simply wanted McCain dead.

He didn't like it, but he knew what he had to do. He took the map out of Rahim's backpack and studied it. Simba River Camp was clearly marked—and there was the track that he had seen from the air. It led all the way to the dam, rising up the side of the valley. He could follow the river for the first mile and then cut across the countryside using the compass. It wouldn't be too difficult to pick up the track.

There was electricity up there. He had seen one of the pylons. If he could find it again, it would lead him to the dam.

Finally, Alex examined the bomb. It wasn't very complicated either. All he would have to do is set the timer, which operated like an ordinary alarm clock, then activate it by throwing a single switch. What was it that Rahim had told him? He had to locate one of the two main valves. That was where he would place the bomb.

Alex took out the medicine, then put on the backpack and tightened the straps. He felt bad just walking out on Rahim, particularly after the agent had just saved his life. But at least he could make sure that he wasn't found by the Kikuyu tribemen. He would follow the path back to the river where he had first been taken. He would do his best to cover his tracks, and then he would set off in another direction, making sure that he disturbed the vegetation as much as possible. If McCain did realize that Beckett was missing and sent his men after him, they would follow the new path. Rahim would be left alone and Alex had no doubt that, once he woke up, he would be able to look after himself.

The decision was made. Alex looked up at the sky. The sun was directly overhead, beating down on him. It was midday. Before long it would begin its journey down.

Alex took a swig out of the water bottle and set off. Two miles in this unfamiliar countryside would take him as many hours. He just hoped he wasn't already too late.

Chapter 22: MARGIN OF ERROR

ONE O 'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON, London time.

The navy blue Jaguar XJ6 drove around Trafalgar Square and then headed down Whitehall, in the direction of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. The weather forecasters had been predicting snow, but so far it had held back. Even so, it was a hard, cold day, with the wind skittering along the sidewalks. Inside the car, the heat had been turned up and the windows were tinted. Both of these helped keep the winter at bay.

The Jaguar passed the famous Banqueting House, where the first King Charles had lost his head, and turned onto Downing Street. The black steel gates opened automatically to admit it. It stopped outside Number Ten and two people, a man and a woman, got out. As always, there was a handful of news reporters in the street, making their broadcasts against the backdrop of the most famous door in the world, but none of them noticed the two new arrivals, and if they had, it would have been extremely unlikely that they would have recognized them. Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones had never been photographed. Their names didn't appear on any government profiles.

Neither of them needed to knock. The door swung open as they approached and they passed into the brightly colored entrance hall with a surprisingly long corridor stretching out in front of them. They made no sound at all as they walked along the plush carpets, beneath the chandeliers, toward the far staircase. As usual, the walls were lined with paintings that had been borrowed from a central government reserve. They were by British artists, most of them modern and rather bland.

Blunt examined them as he continued forward, not because he was interested in art—he wasn't—but because they might give him some insight into the mind of the man who had chosen them. There was a new prime minister in Downing Street. He had been voted in just a month before, and what did the paintings say about him? He liked the countryside, fox hunting, and windmills. His favorite color was blue.

Of course, Blunt already knew everything about the new man—from the state of his marriage (happy) to the last payment he had made on his credit card (£97.60 for a meal at The Ivy). There wasn't a single prime minister in England who hadn't been thoroughly checked by MI6: their families, their friends and associates, what websites they liked to visit, where they took their vacations, how much money they spent every week. There was always a chance that the information might reveal a security risk or something that the prime minister didn't want anyone to know.

The two of them reached the staircase and began to climb up to the first floor, passing the painted portraits and photographs of past prime ministers, spaced out at regular intervals. There was a man in a suit waiting at the top, gesturing toward an office. The building was full of young men in suits, some of them working for Blunt, although they probably didn't know it. Blunt and Mrs. Jones went into the office and there was the prime minister, waiting with two advisers, sitting behind a desk.

“Mr. Blunt ... please, take a seat.”

The prime minister wasn't happy, and it showed. Like all politicians, he didn't entirely trust his spy

masters and he certainly didn't want one sitting opposite him now. It wasn't fair. He hadn't been in power very long. It was certainly too soon for his first international crisis. There were two men sitting with him, one on each side. They were trying to look relaxed, as if they just happened to be passing and had decided to pop in for the meeting.

"I don't think you've met Simon Ellis," the prime minister said, nodding at the fair-haired, rather plump man on his left. "And this is Charles Blackmore." The other man was also young, though with prematurely gray hair. "I thought it might be helpful if they joined us."

Blunt hadn't met either of them, but of course he knew everything about them. They had both been at Winchester College with the prime minister. Ellis was now a junior civil servant in the Treasury.

Blackmore had left a career in television to become director of strategy and communications. The two men loathed each other. The prime minister didn't know this. They were also loathed by almost everyone else.

"Well ... ," the prime minister began. He licked his lips. "I've read your report on the situation in Kenya and it does seem to be very alarming. But the first question I really do have to ask you is—why did your agent feel it necessary to send his information via the Indian secret service?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that," Blunt replied. "We only know what you know, Prime Minister. It's all in the file. Our agent was kidnapped and smuggled out of the country against his will. Somehow he must have managed to break free and fell in with an agent from RAW."

"Research and Analysis Wing," Blackmore muttered helpfully.

"We have no idea what RAW was doing in Kenya, and so far they've refused to tell us. I'm afraid foreign intelligence agencies are always overcautious when it comes to protecting their own. But if I may say so, Prime Minister, it's completely irrelevant. What matters is the report itself and the very serious threat it contains."

The prime minister picked up a sheet of paper that had been lying in front of him. "This was sent by e-mail," he said.

"Yes."

"And it suggests that this man, Desmond McCain, is engaged in a plot to poison the wheat crop in Kenya for his own financial gain."

Blunt blinked heavily. "I'm glad you had time to read it," he muttered.

The prime minister ignored the rudeness. He put the paper down. "What makes you believe this information is reliable?" he asked.

"We have absolutely no reason to doubt it."

"And yet I understand that this agent of yours, the one who sent the report—which, incidentally, has no fewer than three spelling mistakes—is only fourteen years old."

There was a long pause. The two advisers glanced at the prime minister, urging him on.

"Alex Rider. Is that his name?" the prime minister asked.

“He’s never let us down in the past,” Mrs. Jones cut in. She was carrying a slim leather case, which she opened. She took out a thin file marked TOP SECRET in red letters and handed it across. “These are the details of just four of the assignments he’s undertaken on our behalf,” she continued. “The most recent of them was in Australia.”

“Shouldn’t he be in school?”

“He called in sick.”

“Let me have a look ...” The prime minister opened the file and read it in silence. “You certainly seem to have a very high opinion of him,” he remarked. “And let’s say for the sake of argument that it’s justified. Let’s assume that everything that he has told you is true—”

“Then by four o’clock this evening, the wheat field will have been activated,” Blunt said. In fact, Alex’s e-mail had crossed two time zones. He had sent it at midday. It had arrived in New Delhi at half past two, Indian time. They had kept it for three hours before they had sent it to MI6 where it arrived at noon, UK time. Four o’clock in England would be seven o’clock in Kenya, and sunset. They had less than three hours in which to act. “The wheat will have been turned into a million doses of ricin,” Blunt went on. “At the same time, the spores that McCain sprayed onto the field will take off and begin to spread across the rest of Kenya. It will settle on the next field and then the one after that. It’s impossible to say how many millions of seeds Greenfields has supplied over the past five years. All we know for sure is that within three months, the entire country will be poisoned.”

“We can let McCain know we’re onto him,” Ellis said. “There’s not going to be any charity appeal. Once he knows that, there’ll be no point in going ahead.”

“I agree.” Blackmore nodded his head, secretly annoyed that he hadn’t spoken first.

“We don’t have any way to contact McCain, short of parachuting into Simba River Camp,” Blunt replied. “And anyway, we’re too late. There’s a biological clock that’s already ticking. The damage has been done.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“We need to speak to the Kenyan government and send in troops. The field has to be neutralized, probably with flamethrowers. And we also have to find Alex Rider. We’ve heard nothing more from him. I want to know he’s safe.”

Although she didn’t show it, Mrs. Jones was surprised. It was the first time she had ever heard Blunt show any concern for Alex. Even when he had been shot, Blunt’s main concern had been keeping the story out of the newspapers.

“I’m not sure that’s possible, Mr. Blunt.” The prime minister shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “It might be a bit awkward explaining to the Kenyan authorities that a British citizen has just launched a biochemical attack on their country ... and let’s not forget that Greenfields actually receives government funding! Of course, it wasn’t my government that agreed to it, but even so, the political fallout could be appalling. Frankly, the less said the better. And I definitely think we ought to handle the situation ourselves.”

“I have an SAS task force on standby,” Blunt said.

“It would still take too long to fly them to Africa,” Blackmore said. He glanced at the prime minister, waiting for permission to continue. The prime minister nodded. “But in my view, we can do better than that,” he said. “We have an RAF Phantom squadron in Akrotiri, Cyprus. They’re already fueling. They can be in the air in half an hour.”

“And what do you intend to do with them?” Blunt asked.

“It’s very simple, Mr. Blunt. We’re going to bomb the entire wheat field. After all, thanks to your agent, we know exactly where it is.”

“But won’t the bombs do McCain’s work for him? You’ll actually blow the spores into the air. You’ll spread them all over Africa.”

“We don’t believe so. The Phantoms will be carrying AGM-65 Maverick air-to-surface tactical missiles with infrared tracking. They’ll be able to pinpoint the target exactly. Each plane has six missiles. Each missile contains eighty-six pounds of high explosive. The advice we’ve been given is that there’s a 99.5

percent probability that every single one of the spores will be destroyed in the firestorm.”

“That still leaves room for error,” Blunt said.

“And what about Alex?” Mrs. Jones added. “For all we know, he could still be in the area. Are we going to launch a missile strike against him too?”

“I don’t think we have any choice,” Ellis said. He reached down and picked a speck of dust off his tie.

“There’s no reason to believe he’s anywhere near the target area.”

“And if he is?”

“I’m sure you’d agree that we can’t allow one life to get in the way. Not when we’re trying to save thousands.”

There was a brief silence. The prime minister was looking more uncomfortable than ever. But then he spoke again. “I think we’ve come to a unanimous decision, Mr. Blunt.”

“You certainly have,” Blunt muttered.

“And before you leave, there is one thing I do have to ask you. Exactly how many agents do you have who are underage ... which is to say, sixteen years old or younger?”

“We have only one,” Blunt replied. “There is only one Alex Rider.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” The prime minister looked apologetic. “To be honest, I was rather horrified to discover that the British secret service would even consider employing a minor. I can see from his file that he’s been tremendously useful to you and he certainly deserves our gratitude. But putting children into danger, no matter how compelling the reason ... well, I’m not sure the public would stand for it. In my view, recruiting him in the first place was a serious error of judgment.”

“Well, if your Phantom jets manage to kill him, that won’t be a problem anymore, will it,” Blunt said. He was speaking evenly and without emotion, but it was the nearest Mrs. Jones had ever seen him come to losing his temper.

“I hope it won’t come to that, Mr. Blunt. But whatever happens, I want to make it clear that my government will not tolerate this sort of thing again. This is Alex’s last assignment, do you understand me? I want him back at school.”

The meeting was over. Blunt and Mrs. Jones stood up and walked out of the room, back down the stairs, and out into the street where their car was waiting for them.

“The man is an idiot,” Blunt snapped as they swept through the gates at the end of Downing Street.

“He talks about a 0.5 percent margin of error. But I spoke to Redwing, and she thinks it’s much higher.

These missiles of his won’t kill the disease. They’ll spread it ... farther and faster than anyone could imagine.”

“What about Alex?” Mrs. Jones asked.

“I’ll talk to RAW the moment we get back. But their man has gone silent. Nobody knows what’s happening in Kenya.” He glanced briefly out of the window as they turned into Whitehall. “It looks as if, once again, Alex Rider is on his own.”

“Where did you find this?”

Desmond McCain was sitting behind the folding table that he used as a workplace in his own private cabin at Simba River Camp. The room was similar to the one in which Alex had been kept, except that there was no bed and the walls were decorated with photographs of the office buildings that McCain had once developed in the east end of London. Although the fan had been turned to full speed, the air was still hot and sluggish. There was sweat on his head and on his face. It was seeping through the shoulders of his jacket.

He was looking at a leather shoe, one he recognized. The last time he had seen it, it had been on Myra Beckett’s foot. In fact, it still was. The foot, bitten off just above the ankle, was still inside.

“It was beside the river, sir.”

Njenga was also in the room, standing with his legs apart and his hands behind his back. He had become the leader of the dozen men working for McCain. The rest of them spoke only Bantu, but he had been to school in Nairobi and spoke fluent English. McCain took one last look at all that remained of his fiancée. A single tear stole out of his eye and crept down his cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Also on the table was a scrap of material, part of Alex’s shirt. McCain examined it. “What about this?”

he asked.

“It was in the same place.”

“By the river.”

“Yes, sir.”

McCain held the shirt in his huge hands, tugging at it with his fingers. It had been more than two hours since he had noticed that Myra was missing and had sent out his men to find her. They had come back with this. What could possibly have happened? He had left her standing on the observation platform, waiting for the child to come to the end of his strength and to fall as, inevitably, he must. There was no way that Alex Rider would have been able to reach her. Nor could he have escaped. It had all been too carefully arranged. And yet there was something ...

“There is no blood on this shirt,” he said. “We’ve been tricked. Somehow, the child got away.”

Njenga said nothing. The rule here was to speak only when it was essential.

“He can’t have gone far, even with a two-hour start. He has nowhere to go. He won’t have crossed the river, not knowing what’s in it. So it should be a simple matter to track him down.” McCain had come to a decision. “I want you to take the men—all of them—and set off after him. I’m not asking anything clever. I want you to bring him back to me alive if you possibly can. I would like to have the pleasure of finishing this once and for all. But if you think he’s going to get away, then kill him and bring me back his head. Do you understand? This time, I want to be sure.”

“Yes, sir.” Njenga showed no concern about killing and decapitating a child. All that mattered to him was the money that would come to him at the end of the month.

“Go now. Don’t come back until the job is done.”

A few minutes later they all left, twelve men carrying a variety of weapons, including spears, knives, and machetes. Half of them had guns. Njenga himself carried a German-manufactured Sauer 202 bolt-action hunting rifle equipped with a Zeiss Conquest scope. He knew he could shoot the eye of an antelope out at two hundred yards. He had done so many times.

They found two tracks at the river. The first one went into the bush and came back again. The second, which was much clearer, headed off toward the north. This was the path they chose. Alex Rider had a two-hour start, but they were Kikuyu tribesmen. They were taller, faster, and stronger than him. They knew the land.

They set off at a fast run, dodging through the undergrowth, confident that they’d catch up with him in no time at all.

Chapter 23: SIMBA DAM

THE BIRDS PERCHED HIGH UP in the camphor tree were definitely vultures. The shape was unmistakable—the long necks and the bald heads—and the way they sat, hunched up and still. There were about ten of them, ranged across the branches, black against the afternoon sky. But the question Alex had to ask himself was: Were they waiting for him?

He had no idea how long he had been running for, but he knew he couldn't go on much longer. He was dehydrated and close to exhaustion, his arms covered in scratches, his face burned by the African sun.

The bits of his school uniform that he was still wearing couldn't have been less well suited to this sort of terrain. The black polyester pants trapped the heat, and his lace-up dress shoes had caused him to slip twice. Each time he had come crashing down to the ground, he had wearily reminded himself that there was a bomb strapped to his back. Not that he could have forgotten it. The weight of Rahim's backpack was dragging him down, the straps cutting into his shoulders. Well, if the bomb went off, the vultures would have their feast. It would just come in snack-sized pieces.

The journey should have been simple. After all, he had seen where he had to go from the air.

Unfortunately, the landscape looked very different at ground level when he was stuck in the middle of it. The sudden rising hills, the thick vegetation, the spiky shrubs that forced him to turn another way ...

all these had been flattened out when he was in the Piper Cub. The bush had swallowed him up. The dam, the pylons, the track had all disappeared.

He had to rely on the map and his own sense of direction. To start with, he had kept the river on his right—near enough to glimpse the water through the trees but not so close as to attract the attention of whatever might be lurking within it. That was his greatest fear. He was in the middle of a killing field—and he wasn't being escorted around like a tourist in a four-by-four. It had been midday when he set out and most of the animals would have been asleep, but the sun was already beginning to cool and very soon they would awaken and begin their ceaseless search for food. Was he prey? He could imagine his scent creeping out. All around him, invisible eyes could be watching his progress, already measuring the distance. He had seen elephants, monkeys, and, of course, crocodiles. What other horrors might be waiting for him around the next corner if he was unlucky? There could be lions or cheetahs.

He had thought of taking the Dragunov sniper rifle or searching Rahim's pockets for other weapons, but in the end he had decided against it. Rahim might need them when he recovered consciousness.

Now he wished he hadn't been so generous.

After about half a mile, he had turned away from the river, heading in what he hoped would be the direction of the dam—and it was then that his progress became harder. This time it was the map that was deceiving him. It hadn't showed that the ground sloped steeply uphill, although he should have worked it out for himself. Rahim had told him that the water held back by the Simba Dam flowed through two hydroelectric turbines. Since water only flows downhill, it was fairly obvious that he would have to climb.

It was hard work, weighed down in the hot sun. And the African landscape was huge. He knew he had only two miles to cover, but somehow the distances seemed to have been magnified so that even a shrub or a tree right in front of him always took too long to reach. Worse still, after leaving the river behind him, Alex had lost all sense of direction. The colors were too muted: the pale greens and browns, the faint streaks of yellow and orange. You could hide a herd of elephants here and not see them. There was nowhere for the eye to focus. There were no people, no houses, nothing that looked like a pathway or a road. This was the world as it must have been long ago, before man began to shape it to his needs. Alex felt like an intruder. And he was utterly lost.

But as long as he was climbing uphill, he had to be going the right way. He stopped and took out Rahim's water bottle. He had already drunk from it three times, and he had tried to ration himself, but even so, he was surprised to find it almost empty. He finished the last drops and slung the empty container into the bush. Let the Kikuyu tribesmen pick it up. Alex had no doubt that they were already closing in behind him.

The bush ahead suddenly parted. Alex froze. It was an animal of some sort, small and dark, hidden by the long grass. And it was headed toward him. For a moment he felt the same uncontrollable terror that McCain had inflicted on him at the crocodile pit. If this was a lion, then it was all over. But then he relaxed. The animal was a warthog. For a moment it stared at him with its small, brutish eyes. Its upturned nose sniffed the air, and Alex could imagine it asking itself the same question it must ask every day. *Food?* Then it made its decision. This creature was too big and probably wouldn't taste very nice. It turned around and fled the way it had come.

Alex looked back. What time was it? There was a mountain ridge over to the west, lost in the heat haze like a strip of gray silk. The sun was sinking slowly behind it and there was already a faint moon visible against the clear blue sky. A meeting place of night and day. Alex wiped a grimy hand over his face. A mosquito whined in his ear. He wondered if Rahim had woken up yet. What would the Indian agent do when he discovered he was alone?

A movement caught his eye. At first, Alex thought he had imagined it—but there it was again. An animal? No. About a dozen men were making their way toward him. They were still at least half a mile away, far down at the bottom of the slope that Alex had been climbing. They were spread out in a line and Alex could just make out their black faces, the combat clothes they were wearing, and the weapons they carried or had strapped to their backs. He knew exactly who they were. He also knew that if he had seen them, they had seen him. If he stayed where he was, they would be with him in less than fifteen minutes.

Forcing himself on, he broke into a run. There was a thicket of trees to one side and he made for it, wondering if he might be able to lose himself among the trunks and branches. But it was a foolish hope. Alex knew that McCain's men must have been tracking him from the start and that a single broken blade of grass or a fallen leaf would have been like a flashing neon sign for them. Now it was just a question of speed. Could he reach the dam before they caught up with him? Could he detonate the bomb? Alex had no doubt that he was going to be captured and killed. But he would die more happily if he knew that he had beaten McCain.

The wood ended as suddenly as it had begun. On the other side was a field and the first man-made object that he had seen since he set out ... the remains of a low wooden fence. He leapt over it and continued running, aware that he was surrounded by a very different sort of vegetation. It was wheat!

Incredibly, he had actually found his way to McCain's wheat field. So the dam must be directly ahead of him. He still couldn't see it, but he knew it was there. If he just continued forward he would have to come upon it.

Suddenly, he was racing through the stalks. He could feel it scratching at his ankles and his hands. It surrounded him. And with a jolt of horror he wondered if it had switched yet, if the spores had done their work. If so, he was running through a vast field of poison. Each one of these bright yellow blades could be the death of him. The very air he breathed could be full of ricin. Grimly, Alex kept his lips tightly shut and his arms held high. It seemed incredible to him that McCain could have done this: taken something as natural, as universal as a wheat field and turned it into something deadly.

He glanced back. There was no sign of his followers. Seeing them had given him new speed and determination. Over to one side he saw the electricity pylon that he had spotted before, or one identical to it—not steel, but wood, and only four or five yards high. It was still a quarter of a mile away, but he made for it. The wires would lead to the turbines and the turbines had to be somewhere beneath the dam. He tried to remember on which side he had seen the track. That would be the fastest way forward.

Was it possible that Njenga had come after him in the Land Rover? No. Alex would have heard the engine by now.

The wheat, waves and waves of it, crunched beneath his feet as he drove his way through it. He liked the sound that it made. He wanted to crush as much of it as he could, but the field seemed to go on forever, trapped between the two rock faces that rose up on each side.

Where was the dam? He should have been able to see it by now.

The wheat suddenly ended—so abruptly that it was as if Alex had fallen from one world to another. He was on the track! There it was, right underneath him. So how far did he have to go? How much farther *could* he go? He glanced back. There was still no sign of the Kikuyu tribesmen, but the wheat would cause them no problems. In fact, the trackers would have a field day. Alex would have left a highway for them to follow. He had to keep up his pace. They would surely have doubled theirs.

The track had once been covered with asphalt, but it was full of potholes now, with weeds and wild grass sprouting through. Alex guessed it would be used both by the farmers coming up to harvest the wheat and by technicians working on the hydroelectrics. He could make out tire tracks and hoofprints.

It was an easier surface for running, but he was still going uphill and his mouth was dry. He resisted the temptation to look back. He had no time to waste. His muscles were taut and his whole body was tingling with the anticipation of a knife or a bullet in his back.

And then the track turned a corner and there, ahead of him, was the Simba Dam.

It was completely bizarre and out of place. That was Alex's first thought. This huge gray wall had been constructed in the middle of all this unspoiled nature, and it had no right to be there. It wasn't exactly ugly. Indeed, the great curve, stretching from one side of the valley to the other, had a certain

gracefulness. Beaten by the sun, the concrete had faded so that it blended in with the rocks that surrounded it. But it was still a scar. In a strange way, it reminded him of what had happened to McCain's face. The dam cut the landscape in two, and the two halves didn't quite meet.

Alex stumbled to a halt and stood there panting, his entire body covered in sweat. He desperately needed a drink. He wished now he had taken more care with his water supply.

There was no sign of the lake from where he was standing at the very foot of the dam, surrounded by discarded pieces of cement and broken rocks that must have been blasted during the construction. The surface of the water had to be about ninety feet above him and, of course, on the other side. He could see enormous slots in the wall, oversized letter boxes with what looked like metal gates cutting them in half. Presumably these could be raised or lowered to allow the water to spill through. Alex tried to imagine the amount of pressure that must be pushing against the wall itself, the tons and tons of water being held back. There was nobody here. Somewhere—perhaps in Nairobi—someone would press a button and a sluice would open. And then some of the water—just a few million gallons—would rush down a series of hidden pipes to the turbines, where its energy would be siphoned off to provide electricity before it was finally released to feed the crops.

Suddenly the bomb he was carrying felt very small. As he followed the track to its end, the Simba Dam loomed over him, much bigger and more complicated than anything he had imagined. It curved in two directions, forming a letter C around him but also slanting out over his head, away from the water.

What had Rahim called it? A double curvature arch dam. Now that he was here, it was easier to understand what that meant.

Two drainage slipways ran up on either side. These were basically curving roads running up the side of the hill, though so steeply that no car would be able to make the journey. Alex guessed that they had something to do with the water, which could be directed down them and into the valley if there happened to be heavy rainfall and the threat of a flood. Two concrete staircases had been built next to them, one for each slipway, with about a hundred steps leading up to the top. There was one other way up, a single ladder clinging to the face of the dam, leading to two inspection platforms, one above the other, and finally to the lip of the dam itself. The ladder was dangerous because it wasn't quite vertical.

Following the curve of the wall, it slanted outward. It was also narrow, steep, and covered in rust.

Alex took this all in, then turned his attention to a construction directly in front of him. It looked like something out of the Second World War ... a solid concrete bunker with an entrance and three barred windows. A pair of fat steel pipes jutted out, pointing at him like the cannons of two tanks that might have been parked next to each other inside. Both of them were capped, making them look like oversized industrial oil cans. They were connected to the dam by hydraulic steel claws with a network of smaller pipes, wires, and taps around them. The concrete underneath them was stained. It had recently been wet.

Alex knew that he was looking at the two valves that Rahim had described. His targets. He took one quick look back over his shoulder, then hurried forward. He had perhaps five minutes to position the

explosive before the Kikuyus arrived. Even as he ran, he wriggled out of the backpack and opened it. The concrete building had a sort of entrance, a narrow slit that led into an inner chamber with more pipes and machinery. While he was in here, Alex would be out of sight. Surely he couldn't have left a trail on the broken rock and other debris in front of the dam. With a bit of luck, the trackers wouldn't be able to find him ... until it was too late.

He had the bomb in his hands. It couldn't have been more old-fashioned or easier to understand. That was what made terrorism all the more frightening—the fact that it relied on such simple devices. The glass window in front of the clock face opened and Alex was able to take the single hand and move it as many minutes as he wanted, up to sixty. He made a quick calculation. It would take him about two minutes to climb up to the top of the dam, using one of the staircases beside the slipways. Once he was there, he would be safe from the torrent of water. But what about the Kikuyus? Suddenly, Alex had an idea.

He turned the hand of the clock to the figure 5, then pressed the two switches. A green light came on and the clock began to tick. So it was done. Alex looked around him. It didn't matter which valve he chose. He just had to hope that the explosion—contained within the concrete walls—would be strong enough to rupture them both. He placed the bomb on top of one of the pipes, wedging it against the ceiling. Now to get away.

He slithered out of the opening and stopped in dismay. He saw three Kikuyu men just a short distance ahead of him. They had almost reached the end of the track and were gazing at the dam as if it had deliberately chosen to block their path. There was no more than fifty yards between them. They saw Alex at once. One of them called out. The other threw his spear. It fell short. None of them seemed to have guns.

Alex began to run. He headed for the nearest slipway, but he hadn't even begun to climb when another of McCain's men appeared at the top, pointed down, and shouted. Alex realized what had happened. The dozen tribesmen had arrived at the dam and, as he had hoped, they had lost his track. So they had separated. They were all around him now, coming at him from all sides.

And he had made a terrible miscalculation.

There were just four and a half minutes until the bomb would go off. He didn't have time to go back into the bunker and change the time of the detonation ... he'd be trapping himself and it would only draw attention to what he had done. He had to move quickly—and preferably up. If he stayed here, he would be killed by the blast or drowned in the rush of water. The slipway on the right was covered.

Alex looked the other way. Yet another tribesman had appeared and was scampering down. The three men who had first seen him were getting closer.

That just left the rusty, winding ladder, running up the side of the bunker onto the roof and then up toward the two platforms.

Alex grabbed hold of the first rung and began to climb.

The F-4 Phantom 11 fighter jets had taken off at exactly 3:45 P.M. local time, their Rolls-Royce Spey

engines powering them down the runway and into the air, climbing at 40,000 feet per minute. There were three of them. They had leveled off at 80,000 feet, moving into a classic arrow formation, before turning south toward Africa. Each one carried eight missiles. Between them, they were confident that they had enough firepower to turn McCain's wheat field into a blazing hell in which nothing, not so much as a single microbe, would survive.

There was, of course, the faintest possibility that the initial force of the impact would propel some of the mushroom spores into the air, ahead of the flames. These spores would then travel very fast and very far and do their lethal work elsewhere. But as is so often the way with British politics, a decision had been made. If it was later shown to be wrong, all the evidence would be gently massaged to show that no other decision had been possible. Not that the public would ever hear about this. The orders that the three Phantom pilots had received were top secret. Their flight plan had not been recorded. As far as the world was concerned, they hadn't even taken off.

And when the three planes crossed the Kenyan border, heading west from the Indian Ocean, the urgent inquiries from air traffic control in Nairobi were ignored. Later, it would be explained that they had accidentally strayed off course during a training mission. Profuse apologies would be offered to the Kenyan government. But for now, they were observing strict radio silence.

The Phantoms were equipped with the Northrop target identification system, essentially a telescopic camera fitted to the left wing and connected to a radarscope inside the cockpit. As Alex began to climb the ladder at the Simba Dam, the planes began to drop altitude, flying toward the Rift Valley at just under 1,200 miles per hour. Inside their cockpits, the pilots made their final preparations. There would be no need for a flyby. The target coordinates were locked in. Once they had visual contact, they would open fire.

Alex was halfway up the ladder, with the first maintenance platform stretching out above his head. It was hard work, climbing up. Because of the curve of the dam, he was leaning outward, and the force of gravity was against him; every time he pulled himself up another rung, he felt himself being dragged backward. The sun was now beating down on him, burning his shoulders and back. He forced himself to keep going. He was painfully aware of the bomb he had activated and that was ticking away even now. If only he had given himself more time! If it went off before he reached the top of the dam, there was a good chance the ladder would be blown off the wall—and him with it. He was already too high up. If he fell, he would die.

He grabbed hold of the next rung and looked back, only to see two of the tribesmen who had raised the alarm—at this height they were no more than toy figures—running down to the foot of the dam. The third was holding back. None of them seemed anxious to climb the ladder after him. Why?

He looked up and saw the reason. They had no need to follow him. Another Kikuyu man had reached the center of the dam and was already climbing down.

There was no way out. Alex consoled himself with the knowledge that nobody knew about the bomb apart from him and that in about two or three minutes it would explode, releasing millions of gallons of water that would flood the valley, drowning the wheat. It would be mission accomplished ... except that he wouldn't be around to see it. Somewhere in his mind, he wondered if anyone would

ever discover what had happened. Perhaps Rahim would make a report if he managed to get away. *He died fighting for what he believed in.* Alex could already see the words inscribed on the medal. Jack could wear it at his funeral.

But he wasn't ready to give up yet. He couldn't go back down. He saw that the third Kikuyu was aiming another spear at him. That was why he had positioned himself farther back. Well, he would be in for a surprise when the valve smashed. A spider down the bath drain! He was about to find out what it felt like. Alex seized hold of the next rung and pulled. Once again, the curving wall pushed him backward, as if it were desperate to make him let go.

The man above him was getting closer. It was Njenga, McCain's first in command. He had already reached the upper platform and was dragging the rifle off his shoulder, bringing it around to pick off Alex. But Njenga knew that he too had made mistakes. First, as he'd approached the dam, he had instructed his men to separate. He had been confused by all the different concrete ramps and stairways, the various outbuildings with their tanks and pipework. He had assumed Alex would try to hide and had given the order to spread out and search for him.

And he had spotted Alex too late. From where he was standing, the slant of the dam put him at a disadvantage. So long as Alex remained underneath him, he was slightly tucked away, out of sight, and Njenga couldn't get off a clear shot. Why, then, was the boy still climbing? He had just reached the lower platform and was continuing up the next stretch of the ladder that would bring the two of them face-to-face. There was no need for shooting just yet. Njenga laid down the rifle, took out his machete, and smiled to himself. How far did the boy think he would be able to climb without hands?

He waited. Alex was getting closer.

Alex knew he couldn't risk going any farther. He could see Njenga's machete blade dangling in the air directly above him. If he climbed another few rungs, he would be in range. He would have to wait for the explosion. Perhaps the shock of it might change things, rearrange them in his favor. It was all he could hope for.

At the bottom of the dam, the Kikuyu tribesman threw his spear. The black needle with its vicious silver point flashed toward Alex. He saw it out of the corner of his eye. The man who had thrown it must have been fantastically strong, as there were at least twenty yards between them. But the spear was off target. It was going to hit the wall just to his left.

At the very last second, Alex let go of the ladder with one hand, his whole body swinging around as if on a hinge. He stretched out with his free hand and caught the spear in midair, then, using all the strength in his shoulder, swung himself back again. At the same time, he lunged upward. He had grabbed hold of the spear at the very bottom end. The beaten metal tip sliced into Njenga's leg, just above the ankle. Njenga screamed and toppled sideways.

Then the bomb went off.

Alex felt the entire ladder jerk violently. He was almost thrown off—and would have been if he hadn't been expecting the shock wave and prepared for it by wrapping himself around the metalwork, clinging on with his arms and his legs. He felt himself being slammed away from the wall of the dam and cried out as a ball of flame rushed past his back and shoulders, shooting into the air. But he was

still there.

The ladder had held. He hadn't been thrown off.

Njenga was less fortunate. Shocked and in pain, with blood pouring out of the wound in his leg, he was caught off balance and plummeted down. He managed one twist in midair before dashing onto the rocks below.

And instantly he was gone. Alex must have positioned the bomb perfectly. It had completely smashed the bottom outlet valve and ruptured the other valve too. It was as if the two biggest taps in the world had been turned on simultaneously. The water didn't just rush out—it erupted with such force that it seemed to obliterate the entire landscape—the rocks, the vegetation, and, of course, the three Kikuyus who had been standing in its path. They were simply washed away, smashed out of existence by a thundering white locomotive that roared over them, taking them with it.

How many thousands of gallons of water were being released by the second? It was impossible to say.

The water didn't even look like water. It was more like smoke or steam—only more solid. Alex saw a huge tree uprooted as if it were no more than a weed, a boulder pushed effortlessly aside. And then the flood reached up for him. He felt the spray whipping into the back of his legs, and looking down, he saw that almost all the ladder had been ripped away, that the twisted metal ended just a few rungs beneath his feet. If he stayed here for a minute more, he too would be sucked into the vortex and obliterated.

Once again he began to climb. The sound of the water was pounding in his ears, deafening him, and he remembered the huge lake that the Simba Dam had been containing and wondered how much longer the curving wall could hold it. The lake was a monster that had been given its first taste of freedom.

This one torrent might not be enough. It would demand more.

Alex was soaked from the spray. He was blistered by the sun. He was close to exhaustion. Yet somehow he dragged himself up to the platform where Njenga had been standing and then onto the last ladder that led to the top. He didn't dare look back. He could still hear an incredible, explosive pounding, the sound of the third day when God created the oceans. Surely it must have been like this.

And he knew that very soon, the river that he had created would reach the wheat field. Every last stalk would be drowned. Maybe the water would even reach the Simba River Camp and destroy that too. He liked the idea of McCain disappearing in a swirl of mud and stones and broken trees. It was nothing less than he deserved.

He reached the top of the ladder and rolled over a low wall with a road on the other side. Dripping wet, gasping for breath, he knelt for a moment, taking stock of his surroundings.

The track that he had followed from the wheat field rose up past one of the slipways and continued over the lip of the dam, where it became a bridge, a dead straight line that crossed from one side to the other. That was where he was now. He had climbed over one hundred feet. The ground, with the churning water, was a long, long way down. On the other side of the dam, in front of him, the lake stretched toward the horizon, completely calm and undisturbed by what was taking place below. Alex could see distant mountains, the clouds, and the emerald sky, all reflected in the mirror of the surface.

He turned back. From here he could make out the sweep of the land, a great plain with the silhouettes of trees and, in the far distance, a herd of gazelles, lost in their surroundings.

And there was the wheat field with the first finger of water trickling through it, widening with every second that passed. In another minute it would begin to drown. In five, it would no longer exist. At least there was that.

But once again he was trapped. The remaining Kikuyu tribesmen were on top of the dam, in two groups, left and right. They had already seen him and were shouting among themselves, excitedly raising their rifles, taking aim. Alex was midway between them. Did they know what had happened while he was on the ladder? It made no difference. They would have fired at him already, except they had to be careful. If they missed, there was a chance they might hit each other.

They began to move forward. Alex could only stand and wait.

The road trembled. Alex felt it, like an earthquake beneath his feet. At first he thought it must be tiredness, that he had imagined it. But then it happened again and this time it was stronger. The entire wall of the dam was shifting. The Kikuyus had felt it too. They stopped dead in their tracks, looking at each other for explanation. The answer was obvious.

The dam was breaking apart. Perhaps the bomb had damaged some of the joints where the individual blocks of concrete had come together in the construction. Or there could always have been a hairline crack, a weakness just waiting for the moment to bring an end to the whole thing. Well, that moment had come. Alex was thrown sideways as the ground tilted. He saw more water gushing out of a newly formed crack. Part of the wall crumbled, huge pieces of masonry tumbling in slow motion, disappearing into the chaos below. He knew that there were just seconds left before the whole thing collapsed. Even if he tried to run, it would be too late.

The Kikuyus were retreating, panic etched into their faces. They had forgotten him. They had to get off the dam and back onto dry land. Two of them lurched into each other and then both of them were knocked sideways, thrown off their feet by the cement floor, which tilted up beneath them, their weapons clanging to the ground. They screamed as they fell over the edge.

Alex fought for balance. Something was coming toward him. What was it now? A plane—but a strange one, small, like a toy. Alex recognized the Piper Cub. It was flying over the lake, heading toward him, so low that the wheels were almost touching the water. Was it McCain? Had he come for revenge? But then he saw a rope trailing from the back and a dark figure hunched over the controls. Rahim! He must have recovered to find Alex missing and somehow guessed what he planned to do. Rahim had come for him. He had told Alex he could fly. He had also said that he could slow the plane down to thirty-five miles per hour. He was steering it straight into the headwind, using the air currents to slow himself down. If he went any slower, he would surely stall.

He knew what Rahim had in mind. But he couldn't do it. Alex would be torn in two.

Another explosion of concrete and water. Part of the dam tumbled like a house of cards, sinking into itself. The ground tilted crazily. Once again, Alex had to struggle to stay on his feet.

The plane was so close that Alex could see the concentration on Rahim's face as he fought to keep himself in the air. The end of the rope was skimming the surface of the lake, snaking a line through the

water. The plane looked slow, but the rope was whipping toward him, almost a blur.

There was no other way.

Blindly, Alex reached up and felt something lash into his chest and the side of his neck. The plane howled over him, so close that it nearly took off his head. The wheels rushed past. Somehow, his scrabbling hands caught hold of the rope, tearing the skin off his palms. The end twisted around him.

And then he was jerked into the air, so hard that he felt like he was being split in half. Pain jolted through his arms and down his spine. His shoulders felt completely dislocated. He was blacking out.

But his feet were in the air. He was being dragged up and now there was nothing beneath him except white foam, the bellowing water, crashing cement. Higher and higher. He wasn't even sure how he was holding on. Somehow the rope had tied itself around him. The ground was rushing past.

Behind him, the Simba Dam disintegrated and the lake surged forward, free at last, hundreds of thousands of gallons pouring down into the valley. All the remaining Kikuyus were swept with it, mercilessly battered to death before they could even drown.

Dangling from the plane, Alex was carried away.

The water, blood red in the setting sun, continued pouring into an ever-widening sea.

In London, the prime minister was on the telephone.

“Yes.” He listened for a moment, a tic of anger beating in his forehead. “Yes, I quite understand. Thank you for keeping me informed.”

He put the phone down.

“Who was that?” Charles Blackmore, the director of communications, was in the office with him. It was 5:15 in the evening, but the day's work at Downing Street wouldn't end for a while yet. There were papers to be signed off, a planned phone call with the president of the United States, and at six o'clock, a cocktail party being held for all the people who had been working on the London Olympics. The prime minister was looking forward to that. He still enjoyed seeing himself in the newspapers, particularly when he was supporting a popular cause.

“It was the RAF in Cyprus,” the prime minister said.

“Is there a problem?”

“Not exactly.” The prime minister frowned. “It seems that this whole business in Kenya was a complete waste of time.”

“Oh yes?”

“We actually deployed three Phantom jets down to this place ... the Simba Valley. The pilots had the exact coordinates. Fortunately, they decided to take a visual sighting before they fired off their missiles.

And just as well ...”

Blackmore waited, a look of polite inquiry on his face.

“There were no wheat fields ... no sign of any crop at all. There’s just a giant lake there. They circled over the entire area, to be sure that there wasn’t any mistake. So either the information given us by MI6

was inaccurate, or this boy, Alex Rider, made the whole thing up.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Well, he’s only a child. I suppose he was seeking attention. But it just shows that I was absolutely right. Remind me to call the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I think I should have a word with them about Alan Blunt. I’m afraid this puts a serious question mark over his judgment.”

“I agree, Prime Minister.” Blackmore coughed. “So what did the Phantoms do?”

“What else could they do? They turned around and went home. The whole thing was a complete waste of time and money. Perhaps we should start looking for someone else to head up Special Operations.”

The prime minister stood up. “How long until the party, Charles?”

“We have forty-five minutes.”

“I think I might change. Put on a new tie. What do you think?”

“Maybe the blue one?”

“Good idea.”

The file that Blunt had brought to the office was still on the desk. There was a photograph of Alex Rider clipped to the first page. The prime minister closed it and slid it into a drawer. Then he went out to get changed.

Chapter 24: UNHAPPY LANDING

THE AIRPORT WAS ON THE OUTSKIRTS of a small town made up of brightly colored houses and shops and seemed to be a stopping point for tourists on their way to or from safari. There were half a dozen private planes lined up beside the single runway and a fancy clubhouse with wooden tables and sunshades where passengers could wait. Everything was very neat. The lawns and the hedges could have belonged to an English country house. There was a small playground with swings and a seesaw, and the children who were playing there were well-dressed and quiet. The evening was completely calm, with the sun setting behind the great mass of Mount Kenya, and the occasional clatter of a propeller starting up or the buzz of a plane landing seemed strangely inappropriate. Surely they could find somewhere else to go about the business of air travel!

Alex Rider took this all in as the Piper J-3 Cub came in to land. They flew low over a row of chalets with the word LAIKIPIA painted in large letters across the roofs, and he guessed that this must be the name of the town. They had been flying for about an hour, heading southeast. He knew they couldn't have gone much farther. Looking over Rahim's shoulder, he had watched the needle on the fuel indicator begin its downward journey. It had arrived at zero a while ago.

After everything he had been through, climbing into the rear seat of the Piper had almost been too much. Pulling himself up the rope, inch by inch, while being whipped through the air at eighty miles per hour and six thousand feet above the ground, he had forced his mind to go blank, to concentrate—totally—on what he had to do. He didn't look down. He wasn't sure he had the stomach for it. But nor did he look up. That would only taunt him with how far he still had to go. All he could do was cling to the rope with his hands and his feet, trying to pretend that this was just a PE class at Brookland, that there was no wind rush on his face, no engines buzzing in his ears, and that when he got to the top he would be given a quick round of applause and then allowed to get changed for French.

The whole thing would have been impossible if the crop duster had been equipped with a closed cockpit. But there were no windows or doors, and when Alex reached the top of the rope, he was able to grab the edge of the plane and pull himself over and into the backseat. He landed awkwardly, his face and shoulder burrowing into the soft leather—but it felt wonderful. He was safe. And he was leaving the Reverend Desmond McCain, the Kikuyus, and the Simba Dam far behind him.

“Untie the rope!”

Rahim had turned around and shouted at him, the wind snatching the words away even as they were spoken. Alex did as he was told, untying the rope from the wing strut and letting it fall back to earth.

He watched it dwindle in the distance until it was no more than a wriggling worm and reflected that it could all too easily have been him, free-falling down to the earth far below. He couldn't believe what he had just been through. He sank back into the seat, belted himself in, and let out a deep sigh of relief.

The RAW agent hadn't spoken again, and Alex was grateful. He was utterly drained and although sleep was impossible with the wind battering against him, he tried as best he could to relax, somehow

to recharge his batteries, to put this whole business behind him. He wanted to go home. With his eyes half open, he watched the landscape slide away beneath him, the different patches of green and brown crisscrossed by roads and dirt tracks with tiny buildings scattered here and there and hinting at some sort of life—normal life—carrying on in the vastness of the Kenyan bush. The Piper’s engine droned on. Rahim was wearing his camouflage jacket. Alex only had his shirt and pants, and as the evening drew in, he began to shiver. Very soon it would be night.

But even though the sun had gone, the sky was still glowing softly when Rahim suddenly shouted into his headset, getting permission from air traffic control at Laikipia to land. The little plane wavered in the air as if finding its balance. The ground, a long strip of tarmac, rushed toward them. Then they bumped down and taxied to a halt. A few airport workers, dressed in bright yellow overalls with TROPICAIR stenciled across their chest, glanced curiously in their direction. It wasn’t often they saw such an old-fashioned aircraft here. And a crop duster! There weren’t any crops for miles. A few tourists sitting outside the clubhouse stood up and watched them come in. A couple of them unfastened their cameras and took pictures.

Rahim turned off the engine and the propeller began to slow down. He took off his headset and twisted around. Alex wasn’t sure what he had been expecting, but he was taken aback by the anger in the agent’s face.

“What did you think you were doing?” Rahim exploded. He still had to shout to make himself heard, but from the look of him, he would have shouted anyway. “You could have gotten yourself killed. You could have gotten me killed!”

“Rahim . . . ,” Alex began. He wanted to climb out of the plane. Couldn’t they have this argument over a cold drink and something to eat?

But Rahim was in no mood to go anywhere. “You stole my equipment. I cannot believe what you did. You left me there—”

“I had to do it.”

“No! My job was to kill McCain. That was all. We could have dealt with his plan afterward. You disobeyed my instructions, Alex. Do you have any idea of the damage you’ve caused? And how do you think my people are going to explain all this to the Kenyan authorities? You took out an entire hydroelectric and irrigation system!”

“Well, maybe you can tell them we saved thousands of lives. They might like that.”

“McCain is still out there. He got away.”

“I left you your gun. Why didn’t you just go and shoot him?”

“Because I had to come after you.” Rahim shook his head in exasperation. “I should have left you to the crocodiles.”

There was a brief silence. The propeller was still turning, but more slowly.

“Where are we?” Alex asked. “What are we doing here?”

“This is Laikipia. We have to refuel. I’m leaving you here. I’ve contacted my people and they’ll arrange for you to be picked up.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going—”

That was as far as he got. To Alex, it appeared as if Rahim had snapped his head around the other way.

At the same time, he was aware of a sudden spray of red vapor filling the air in front of him. Alex looked back to see Desmond McCain, dressed in a brown linen suit, walking toward him, the Mauser pistol in his hand. He turned back to Rahim. The agent was dead. He had collapsed forward over the controls. There was a gaping wound in the side of his head.

Alex felt a wave of anger and disgust. He was also sorry. Despite everything, Rahim had come back for him and saved him ... for the third time. Alex hadn’t even had a chance to thank him.

The propeller stopped.

McCain stood beside the plane, right next to the wing. The gun was now leveled at Alex. How had McCain gotten here? Alex was too shocked to think, but it occurred to him that if Rahim had chosen this airfield to refuel, then McCain might have landed here for exactly the same reason. All around him, he was aware of people—aircrew, tourists, children—running for cover, in panic. They had just seen a stumbling giant of a man, with a silver crucifix in his ear, appear from nowhere and commit murder for no obvious reason. They must think he was insane. If they only knew!

McCain didn’t seem to know where he was—or even to care. He had seen Alex and he had come to settle the score. Nothing else mattered.

“Get out of the plane,” McCain said. His voice was steady, but his eyes were bloodshot and unfocused, the skin around his face stretched tight. He was trembling slightly. He was doing his best to control it, but the muzzle of the gun gave him away.

Alex stayed where he was.

“What do you want, Mr. McCain?” he demanded. “I’m not going anywhere. Nor are you. Your wheat field is at the bottom of a lake. There isn’t going to be any plague. It’s all over.”

“Get. Out. Of. The. Plane,” McCain repeated. His finger tightened on the trigger. He was holding the gun as if he were trying to crush it.

“Why?”

“I want to see you kneeling in front of me. Just for once, I want you to behave like an ordinary child.

You’re going to cry and beg me not to hurt you. And then I’m going to put this gun between your eyes and shoot you dead.”

“Then you might as well shoot me here. I’m not playing your games.”

McCain dropped the gun a few inches so that it was aiming at Alex’s legs. Alex knew that the skin of

the Piper Cub would offer no protection at all. “I can make it slow ...,” McCain said.

Alex nodded. He took one more look around him. It didn't seem as if anyone was going to come to his rescue. The whole airfield had emptied. The other planes—and now he spotted the Skyhawk that had first brought him to Simba River Lodge—were silent, unmoving. Surely someone would have called the police by now ... assuming that there were any police operating in a remote town like Laikipia.

“All right,” he said.

He unbuckled his belt, gripped the sides of the plane, and began to pull himself out. At the same time, he glanced into the front of the plane, past the slumped figure of the pilot. He knew that Rahim had a gun. But there was no sign of it and no way he could search around without receiving a bullet himself.

What else? His eyes fell on the metal lever between the two seats. He thought of the two rubber pipes running underneath his feet, connected to the plastic tanks at the back of the plane. The pipes that had sprayed a wheat field with death.

The whole system must work on pressure, with the tank pumped up by the engine. They had been flying for an hour, so there had to be enough pressure in the tubes. But was there any of the mushroom spore left in the tanks? Alex didn't dare turn around and look. McCain was still standing under the wing, waiting for him to climb down.

Alex stood up. As he swung his leg over the side, he pretended to stumble. His hand shot out, slamming the lever down. At once he heard a hiss—and a mere second later, a film of gray, slimy liquid squirted out of the pipes. McCain was taken by surprise. For a moment he was blinded, caught in the middle of the shower, the mushroom brew splashing over his head and into his eyes.

McCain fired his gun—but missed. After slamming the lever, Alex had thrown himself the other way, tumbling over the far side of the plane and down to the grass below. He heard the bullet thwack into the fuselage, inches from his head. At the same time, he hit the ground and cried out, a white flash blazing behind his eyes. He had landed badly, twisting his ankle beneath him. Worse still, the tanks had only contained a few dregs. Alex had barely got to his feet and begun to limp away before the shower stopped and McCain, cursing and wiping his eyes, was after him.

Alex could barely do more than hobble. His foot wouldn't take his full weight. Every step was an agony that shot up his leg and all the way to his neck. He knew he wouldn't be able to go much farther, and anyway, there was nowhere to go. Behind him, the grass and the landing strip stretched out, flat and empty. The perimeter was fenced off with an open gate leading to the edge of the town, but it was too far away. He would never reach it. McCain didn't seem to be moving fast, but like a figure in a nightmare he was getting closer with every step.

Alex came to a line of drums stacked up on the grass right next to the tarmac, each one marked TOTAL

ESSENCE PLOMBÉE. Leaded fuel. Why was it written in French? McCain fired five times. The nearest drum shivered and fuel began to splash out, spouting in five directions. Alex dived for cover behind it. His ankle burned with pain. He wondered if he would be able to get up again.

McCain stopped about ten paces away, as if this was a game and he had all the time in the world.

Casually, he took out a fresh ammunition clip and reloaded the gun. Meanwhile, the fuel continued to gush out.

“You can’t hide from me, child,” McCain shouted. “ ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay, sayeth the Lord.’

That’s Romans chapter twelve. A vengeful god ... isn’t that a wonderful thing? And now, finally, the time for my vengeance has come. Let me see you.”

Alex tested one of the drums. It was full of fuel and too heavy to move. But the drum that McCain had punctured was emptying rapidly. Lying on his back, he pressed both feet against it and pushed with all his strength. It toppled over. Now Alex was exposed. There was nothing between him and McCain’s gun. He got to his knees, leaned on the drum, then rolled it over the tarmac toward McCain.

McCain smiled. He walked forward and placed a single foot on the drum, stopping its progress. He had a clear view of Alex and at this range he couldn’t miss. Alex was still kneeling on the ground. It was just what he wanted.

“Is that the best you can do? Send a drum to run me over? You *are* a child, aren’t you? This isn’t a game, Alex. Do you know how many years I spent planning this operation?” McCain asked. His voice carried across the short distance. He was leaning forward, one foot still perched on the drum, his elbow resting on his thigh. “Do you have any idea what it meant to me? All I wanted was my rightful place in the world. Money is power and I was going to have more than you could possibly imagine.

“And now *you* are going to pay. I’m going to shoot you now. Not once but several times. And then I’m going to walk away.” He lifted the gun. “Good-bye, Alex. You’re going on a slow journey to hell.”

“Let me know what it’s like,” Alex said.

The fuel drum exploded. In the seconds before he had sent it rolling, Alex had attached the black gel-ink pen that Smithers had given him to the metal surface. He had activated it with a thirty-second fuse.

And it had worked. One moment, McCain was taking aim, the next he had disappeared in a pillar of flame that roared into the sky. It really was like a judgment from heaven. He didn’t even have time to scream.

Alex was already twisting away, trying to put as much space between himself and the inferno as he could. He was too close. Blazing droplets of aviation fuel rained down from the sky. He felt them hit his shoulders and back and with horror realized he was on fire. But the grass had recently been watered.

It was cool and damp under his hands. Alex rolled over again and again. His skin was burning. The pain was horrific. But after spinning half a dozen times, he had put out the flames.

He looked back at the tarmac. The charred, unrecognizable figure that had once been the Reverend Desmond McCain was on its knees. One final prayer. The silver earring had gone. There wasn’t very much of him left.

He heard shouting. Police and airport workers were running toward him. Alex couldn’t see them. He was stretched out on the grass, trying to bury himself in it. Was it really over at last, the journey that had begun in a Scottish castle and had led to an airport in Africa? How had he ever gotten himself

into this?

He couldn't move. And he was barely aware of the men who lifted him as gently as possible, laid him on a stretcher, and carried him away.

Chapter 25: SOFT CENTERS

THE SNOW THAT HAD BEEN PROMISED in London had finally arrived.

Only a few inches had fallen during the night, but as usual, it had brought chaos to the streets. Buses had stayed in their depots, the subway system had shut down, schools were closed, and half the workforce had decided to take a day off and stay at home. Snowmen had appeared suddenly in all the London parks, standing under trees, leaning against walls, even sitting on benches ... like some invading army that had come and seen and decided to take a well-earned rest before it set out to conquer.

It was the second week in February, and the winter had taken a grip on the city and seemed determined never to let go. The streets were empty, the parked cars huddled beneath their white blankets, but Jack Starbright had managed to persuade a taxi to bring her to St. Dominic's Hospital in one of the northern suburbs of the city. She had been here before. It was a favorite place of the Special Operations Division of MI6 when its agents were injured in the field. This was where they sent them to recover. Alex had spent two weeks here after he had been shot by Scorpia.

Mrs. Jones was waiting for her in the reception area. She was wearing a black full-length coat with leather gloves and a scarf. It was hard to say if she had just arrived or if she was on her way out.

“How is he?” Jack asked.

“He's much better,” Mrs. Jones said, and it occurred to Jack that she could have been talking about someone who had just recovered from a bad cold. “The burns have healed up and he won't need any skin grafts. He won't be playing any sports for a while. He fractured his ankle at Laikipia airport. But he has amazing powers of recovery. The doctors are very pleased with him.” She smiled. “He's looking forward to seeing you.”

“Where is he?”

“Room nine on the second floor.”

“That's the same room as last time.”

“Maybe we should name it after him.”

Jack shook her head. “I wouldn't bother. He won't be coming back.”

The two women stood facing each other, each one waiting for the other to speak.

Mrs. Jones could see the accusation in Jack's eyes. “This really wasn't our fault,” she said. “Alex met McCain quite by accident. That business in Scotland had nothing to do with us.”

“But that didn't stop you from sending him to Greenfields.”

“We had no idea that McCain was involved.”

“And if you had—would that have stopped you?”

Mrs. Jones shrugged. She had no need to answer.

There was a plastic bag resting on a chair. Mrs. Jones picked it up and handed it to Jack. "You might like to give this to Alex. It's from Smithers. Some chocolates ..."

"Oh yes? And what do they do? Explode when he puts them into his mouth?"

"They're soft centers. Smithers thought he might enjoy them."

Jack took the bag. She glanced toward the elevator, then back at Mrs. Jones. "Promise me that this will be the end of it," she said. "From what you've told me, this time it was worse than ever. It's a miracle he's still alive. Do you have any idea what this must be doing to him ... inside his head, I mean?"

"Actually, I have a very good idea," Mrs. Jones countered. "I asked our psychiatrists to run a few tests on him."

"That's very thoughtful of you. But I mean it, Mrs. Jones. Alex has done enough. I want you out of his life."

Mrs. Jones sighed. "I can't promise you that, I'm afraid. First of all, it's not my decision. And anyway, as I said, this didn't begin with us. Alex has a knack for finding trouble without any help."

"I'm not going to let it happen again."

"Believe me, Jack. I'll be very happy if you can prevent it." Mrs. Jones pulled up her collar and tightened her belt. "Anyway," she said, "Alex is waiting for you. You'd better go up."

"I'm going. Please thank Mr. Smithers for the chocolates."

Jack took the elevator to the second floor. She didn't need to ask for directions. The layout of the hospital was all too familiar. As she approached the door of Alex's room, a woman came out carrying a breakfast tray, and Jack recognized Diana Meacher, the attractive fair-haired nurse from New Zealand who had looked after Alex once before.

"Go right in," the nurse said. "He's been looking forward to seeing you. He'll be so glad you're here."

Jack hesitated, composing herself. Then she went into the room.

Alex was sitting up in bed, reading a magazine. His pajama top was open and she could see that, once again, he was heavily wrapped in bandages, this time around his neck and shoulders. His eyes were bright and he was smiling, but he looked bad. Pain had stamped its memory all over him. He was thin.

The haircut that Beckett had given him when he was smuggled out of the country didn't help.

"Hello, Jack."

"Hi, Alex."

She went over to him and kissed him very gently, afraid that she would hurt him. Then she sat down beside the bed.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Terrible.”

“As terrible as you look?”

“Probably.” Alex put down the magazine, and Jack saw that even this movement made him wince.

“They’ve taken me off painkillers,” he explained. “They say they don’t want me to get addicted to them.”

“Oh, Alex ...” Jack’s voice caught in her throat. She had been determined not to cry in front of him, but she couldn’t keep the tears from her eyes.

“I’m fine,” Alex said. “I’m already much better than I was a week ago.” In fact, Alex had spent ten days in the hospital in Nairobi before MI6 had flown him home.

“I wanted to come out and see you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

Jack understood. If he looked this bad now, she could hardly imagine what he must have looked like then. He wouldn’t have wanted her to see him like that.

“Are you angry with me?” Alex asked.

“Of course not. I’m just relieved to see you. After you went missing, I was ...” Jack stopped herself.

“When can you come home?” she asked.

“I was talking to the nurse just now. She says that if all goes well, it should only be a couple of days. Tuesday. Wednesday at the latest.”

“Well, thank goodness for that,” Jack said. “You know what Thursday is.”

“No.” Alex had no idea.

“Alex!” Jack stared at him.

“Tell me ...”

“Thursday, February thirteenth. It’s your birthday, Alex. You’re going to be fifteen.”

“Am I?” Alex laughed. “So, what are you going to buy me?”

“What do you want?”

“I want to go home. I want peace and quiet. And I want that new version of Assassin’s Creed ... it’s just come out on PlayStation.”

“I’m not sure those violent computer games are good for you, Alex.”

Jack didn’t tell him that she had already bought it and that a few of his closest friends were waiting for her call, hoping to come around.

Surely MI6 would leave him alone now. They had stolen almost a whole year of his life. But never again. Jack made herself that promise.

In front of her, Alex settled back into the pillows. His eyes were closed and even as she watched, he smiled and fell asleep.

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So to start at the beginning, Martin Pearce and Colin Tucker from British Energy showed me around the Sizewell B nuclear power station in Suffolk. I'm assured that security there is rather tighter than it was at Jowada. I then visited the John Innes Center, which is part of the Norwich BioScience Institutes (and bears no resemblance at all to the Greenfields Center in this story). I was given an extensive tour by Dr. Wendy Harwood and Dr. Penny Sparrow, and they very kindly explained the principles of GM

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THE FINAL MISSION

**ALEX
RIDER**

A stylized logo for the character Alex Rider. It features a silhouette of a person in a running or jumping pose, positioned in the center. The figure is surrounded by several overlapping circular lines that create a sense of motion or a target. The entire graphic is rendered in a metallic, silver color with a glowing effect.

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The Devil and His Boy

THE FINAL MISSION

**ALEX
RIDER**



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ANTHONY HOROWITZ

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Dedicated to every reader who set out
on this journey with me and who has now
come to its end.

SCORPIA RISING

PART ONE

SCORPIA



STOLEN GODS

THE MAN IN THE BLACK CASHMERE coat climbed down the steps of his private, six-seater Learjet 40 and stood for a moment, his breath frosting in the chill morning air. He glanced across the tarmac as a refueling truck rumbled past. In the distance, two men in yellow were standing, talking, in front of a hangar. Otherwise, he seemed to be alone. Ahead of him, a sign read Welcome to London's City Airport, and beneath it an open door beckoned, leading to immigration. He headed for it, completely unaware that he was being watched every step of the way.

The man was in his fifties, bald and expressionless. Inside the terminal, he gave his passport to the official and watched with blank eyes as it was examined and handed back, then continued on his way. He had no luggage. There was a black limousine waiting for him outside with a gray-suited chauffeur behind the wheel. The man offered no greeting as he got in nor did he speak as they set off, following the curve of the River Thames up toward Canning Town and on toward the center of London itself.

His name was Zeljan Kurst and he was wanted by the police in seventeen different countries. He was the chief executive of the international criminal organization

known as Scorpia, and as far as it was known, he had never actually been seen on the streets of London. However, MI6 had been tipped off that he was coming. They had been waiting for him to land. The passport official was one of their agents. They were following him now.

“Heading west on the A13 Commercial Road toward Whitechapel. Car three, take over at the next intersection.”

“Car three moving into position.”

“Okay. Dropping back.”

The disembodied voices bounced across the airwaves on a channel so secret that anyone trying to tune in without the necessary filters would have heard only the hiss of static. It would have been easier to have arrested Kurst at the airport. He could have been made to disappear in five seconds, bundled out in a crate and never seen again. But it had been decided, at the very highest level, to follow him and see where he went. For the head of Scorpia to be in England at all was remarkable. For him to be on his own, and on his way to a meeting, was beyond belief.

Zeljan Kurst was not aware that he was surrounded. He had no idea that his flight plan had been leaked by one of his own people in return for a complete change of identity and a new life in Panama. But even so, he was uneasy. Everything had told him that he shouldn't be here. When the invitation had first arrived on his desk, delivered by a series of middlemen and traveling halfway around the world and back again, he had thought about

refusing. He was not an errand boy. He couldn't be summoned like a waiter in a restaurant. But then he had reconsidered.

When the fourth-richest man in the world asks you to meet him, and pays you one million dollars just to turn up, it might be worth it to hear what he has to say.

"We're on High Holborn. Car four moving to intercept."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. He's turning off."

The limousine had crossed the main road and entered a narrow street full of old-fashioned shops and cafés. The move had taken the MI6 men by surprise, and for a moment there was panic as they struggled to catch up. Two of their cars swerved across the traffic—to a blast of horns—and plunged in after it. They were just in time to see the limousine stop and Zeljan Kurst get out.

"Car four, where are you?" The voice was suddenly urgent. "Where is the target?"

A pause. Then—"He's entering the British Museum."

It was true. Kurst had passed through the gates and was crossing the open area in front of the famous building that rose up ahead of him, its huge pillars stretching from one side to the other. He was carrying an ebony walking stick that measured out his progress, rapping against the concrete. The MI6 men were already piling out of their own cars, but they were too late. Even as they watched from the other side of the gates, Kurst disappeared into the building, and they knew that if they didn't act swiftly, they would lose him for good. There was more

than one way out. It was unlikely that the Scorpia man would have traveled all the way to England just to look at an exhibit. He might have gone inside deliberately to lose them.

“He’s inside the museum. Cars one, two, and three, surround the building. Watch all possible exits. We need immediate backup.”

Someone had taken charge. But whoever it was, his voice sounded high-pitched and uncertain. It was eleven o’clock on a bright February morning. The museum would be crowded with tourists and schoolchildren. If there was going to be any action, if they were going to arrest Zeljan Kurst, this was the last place they would have wanted to do it.

In fact, Kurst was still unaware of his pursuers as he crossed the Great Court, a gleaming white space with a spectacular glass roof sweeping in a huge curve overhead. He skirted around the gift shops and information booths, making for the first galleries. As he went, he noticed a Japanese couple, tiny and almost identical, taking photographs of each other against a twisting staircase. A bearded student with a backpack stood next to the postcards, pulling them out one at a time and studying them as if trying to find hidden codes. Tap, tap, tap. The end of the walking stick beat out its rhythm as he continued on his way. He knew exactly where he was going and would arrive at the exact minute that had been agreed upon.

Zeljan Kurst was a large man with heavy, broad shoulders that formed a straight line on either side of an unnaturally thick neck. He was bald by choice. His head had been shaved and there was a dark gray shadow beneath the skin. His eyes, a muddy brown, showed little intelligence, and he had the thick lips and small, squashed nose of a wrestler, or perhaps a bouncer at a shady nightclub. Many people had underestimated him and occasionally Kurst had found it necessary to correct them. This usually involved killing them. He walked past the statue of a naked, crouching goddess. An elderly woman with a deerstalker hat, sitting on a stool with brushes and oil paints, was making a bad copy of it on a large white canvas. Ahead of Kurst were two stone animals—strangely shaped lions—and to one side an entire temple, more than two thousand years old, brought from southwest Turkey and reconstructed piece by piece. He barely glanced at them. He didn't like museums, although his house was furnished with rare objects that had been stolen from several of them. But that was the point. Why should something that might be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars be left to molder in a dark room, stared at by idiot members of the general public who had little or no idea of its true value? Kurst had a simple rule of life. To enjoy something fully, you had to own it. And if you couldn't buy it, then you would have to steal it.

Ahead of him, two modern glass doors led into a final gallery. He watched as a tall, well-built black man carrying

a notebook and pen walked through, then went in himself. The gallery was huge, stretching out in both directions, like an airport runway. Although there were more than a hundred people there, it wasn't even half full. Everything was gray: the walls, the floor, the very air. But spotlights shining down from the ceiling, ten times higher than the visitors who stood beneath it, picked out the treasures that the room contained and these shone, soft and gold.

They ran along both walls, from one end to the other, a series of marble tablets with a crowd of figures that had been brought together to form a single line. They were men and women, ancient Greeks, some sitting, some standing, some talking, some riding on horseback. Some carried musical instruments, others bundles of linen or plates and glasses for a feast. Many of them were incomplete. Two and a half millennia had worn away their faces, broken off arms and legs. But there was something remarkable about the details that remained. It was easy to see that these had been real people, that they had once lived ordinary lives until they had been frozen in this waking dream, an entire world captured in stone.

Zeljan Kurst barely glanced at them. The gallery had two raised platforms, one at each end, reached by a short flight of steps or an elevator—which must have been used by the man he had come to see. He was on the far right, sitting on his own in a wheelchair, with a blanket over his knees. Kurst walked over to him.

“Mr. Kurst?” The voice was dry and strangled. It came from a lizard neck.

Kurst nodded. He was a careful man and had made it a rule never to speak unless there was a particular need.

“I am Ariston.”

“I know who you are.”

“Thank you for coming.”

Yannis Ariston Xenopolos was said to be worth about thirty-five billion dollars. He had made this money from a huge shipping empire, which he controlled from his offices in Athens. To this he had added an airline, Ariston Air, and a chain of hotels. And now he was dying. Kurst would have known it even without reading stories in the newspapers. It was obvious from the sunken cheeks, the dreadful white of the man’s skin, the way he sat like a hunched-up Egyptian mummy, his body disappearing into itself. But most of all it was in his eyes. Kurst had once been the head of the Yugoslav police force, and he had always been interested in the way the prisoners had looked at him just before he executed them. He could see the same thing right here. The Greek had accepted death. All hope had gone.

“I took a considerable risk coming here.” Kurst spoke with a heavy Eastern European accent which somehow dragged his words down. “What is it you want?”

“I would have thought the answer would be obvious to you.”

“The Elgin marbles . . .”

“Exactly. I wanted you to come here so that you would understand.”

Ariston reached out with a hand that was more like a claw, gripping a lever on the arm of his wheelchair. The whole thing was battery operated, and with a soft whir, it spun him around so that he faced the room.

“This is one of the greatest pieces of art that the world has ever produced,” he began. “Take a look at the figures, Mr. Kurst. They are so beautiful that it is almost impossible to find the words to describe them. They once decorated a temple in the heart of Athens—the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. The frieze that you are examining depicts the summer festival that took place every year in honor of the goddess . . .”

Again the claw pressed down, turning him so that he faced a group of statues that stood inside the chamber, behind him. First there was a horse rising as if out of water, with only its head showing. Then came a naked man, lying on his back. Then three women, all missing their heads. From the way they were arranged, it was clear that these figures had once stood in the triangles at each end of the Parthenon.

“The horse belonged to Helios, the sun god,” Ariston explained. “Next comes Dionysus, the god of wine. The figures to his right are the goddess Demeter and her daughter—”

“I am familiar with the Elgin marbles,” Kurst interrupted. It didn’t matter how much he had been paid. He hadn’t come here for a lecture.

“Then you will also be aware that they were all plundered. Stolen! Two hundred years ago, a British aristocrat called Lord Elgin came to Athens. He tore them off the temple and transported them back to London. Since then my country has asked many times for them to be returned. We have even built a new museum in Athens to house them. They are the glory of Greece, Mr. Kurst. They are part of our heritage. They should come home.”

The old man fumbled in his blanket and produced an oxygen mask, which he pressed against his face. There was the hiss of compressed air and he sucked greedily. At last, he began again.

“But the British government has refused. They insist on keeping this stolen property. They will not listen to the voice of the Greek people. And so I have decided that, although it is the last thing I will do in my life, I will make them listen. That is why I have contacted you and your organization. I want you to steal the sculptures and return them to Greece.”

On the street outside, four more cars had pulled up next to the British Museum, spilling out fifteen more agents. That made twenty-three in total with the ones who had followed Kurst from City Airport. They were fairly confident that their man was still inside the building. But with ninety-four galleries covering a floor space of two and a half square miles, it was going to be almost impossible to find him. And already the order had gone out. Do not, under any circumstances, approach him

while he is in a public area. This man is extremely dangerous. If he feels that he's trapped, there's no saying what he will do. The result could be a bloodbath.

Zeljan Kurst was quite unaware of the approaching MI6 men as he considered what the Greek billionaire had just said.

"Stealing the Elgin marbles won't help you," Kurst said. "The British government will simply demand them back. It would be better to threaten them. To blackmail them, perhaps."

"Do whatever it takes. I don't care. You can kill half the population of this loathsome country if it will achieve what I want . . ." Ariston broke into a fit of coughing. Pearls of white saliva appeared at his lips.

Kurst waited for him to recover. Then he nodded slowly. "It can be done," he said. "But it will take time. And it will be expensive."

Ariston nodded. "This work is my legacy to the Greek people. If you will agree to do it for me, I will pay you five million dollars immediately with a further fifteen million when you succeed."

"It's not enough," Kurst said.

Ariston looked at him slyly. "There was a time when you might have said that and I would have been forced to agree," he said. "But Scorpia is not what it was. There have been two failures in the space of a single year. The operation called Invisible Sword and, more recently, the business in northwest Australia." He smiled, showing

gray teeth. “The very fact that you are here today shows how weak you have become.”

“Scorpia has regrouped,” Kurst retorted. “We have taken on new recruits. I would say we are stronger than ever. We can choose our clients, Mr. Xenopolos, and we do not negotiate.”

“Name your price.”

“Forty million.”

Ariston’s eyes barely flickered. “Agreed.”

“Half in advance.”

“As you wish.”

Kurst turned and walked away without saying another word, his cane beating the same rhythm on the floor. As he made his way back toward the entrance, his mind was already focused on the task that lay ahead. Although he would never have dreamed of saying as much, he was glad that he had come here today. It was actually very much his desire to take on the British government once again. The failures that Ariston had mentioned had both involved the British secret service.

It was fortunate that the old man hadn’t heard the full story. Would he have still approached Scorpia if he had known the almost incredible truth? That both failures had involved the same fourteen-year-old boy?

In the end, it was just bad luck—bad timing—that he left when he did. He was about to reach the Great Court when one of the MI6 agents crossed in front of him and suddenly the two of them were face-to-face, only inches

apart. The agent—his name was Travis—was new and inexperienced. He was unable to keep the shock out of his eyes, and at that moment Kurst knew that he had been recognized.

Travis had no choice. He had been given his orders, but he knew that if he obeyed them he would die. He fumbled in his jacket and pulled out his pistol, the 9mm Browning that has long been a favorite of the SAS. At the same time, he shouted, louder than he needed to, “Stay where you are! If you move, I’ll fire.” It was exactly how he had been trained. He was both exerting his authority over his target and alerting any nearby agents that his cover had been blown.

Unfortunately, in the silence of the museum and with the ceiling so high overhead, his words echoed out. A few tourists turned to see what was happening. They caught sight of the gun. The first seeds of panic were planted and instantly began to grow.

Kurst raised his hands, one of them still holding the ebony walking stick. At the same time, he moved very slightly to one side. Travis followed him with his eyes and didn’t see something flash through the air over Kurst’s shoulder, didn’t even notice it until it had buried itself in his throat. The old woman who had been painting the copy of the kneeling goddess had followed Kurst to the door. Underneath the makeup, she wasn’t old at all, and her brushes might have had tufts at one end, but the handles were precision-made steel and razor sharp. Travis

fell to his knees. In the last second of his life, his trigger finger tightened and the gun went off, the explosion amplified by the stone walls all around. That was when the panic began for real.

The tourists screamed and scattered, some of them diving into the shop or behind the information desks. A group of primary school students, who had just been visiting the Egyptian mummies, crouched down beside the stairs, cowering together. An American woman, standing by herself, began to scream. The British Museum guards, many of them old and long retired from their real careers, remained frozen to the spot, completely unprepared for an event like this. Meanwhile, Kurst stepped over the dead man and continued to move slowly toward the main door.

Of course he hadn't come to the museum alone. Scorpia would not have risked the freedom of its chief executive, even for a million dollars, and its agents surrounded him on all sides. As the other MI6 agents closed in from every direction, still unsure what had happened but knowing that all the rules had changed, they were met by a hail of machine-gun fire. The bearded student who had been examining the postcards had reached into his backpack and drawn out a miniature machine gun with folding shoulder stock and was spraying the hall with bullets. An MI6 man, halfway down the west stairs, threw his arms back in surprise, then jerked forward and tumbled down. The American woman was still screaming. The

primary school children were crying in terror. All the alarms in the building had gone off. There were people running in every direction.

The Japanese man who had been photographing his wife threw his camera on the floor and it exploded with a soft *woomph*, releasing thick, dark green fumes into the air. In seconds, Kurst had disappeared. The Great Court had become a battle zone. Two MI6 men slid to a halt, trying to peer through the smoke. There was a loud crack, then another, and they fell to the ground. They had been shot in the legs by the Japanese woman, who had produced a pearl-handled Nambu pistol from her handbag.

Meanwhile, holding a handkerchief across his face, Kurst had reached the main doors. There had been little security when he came in. There was none as he left. Out of the corner of his eye he saw an MI6 agent try to rush him, then fall back as he was grabbed by his personal bodyguard, the black man with the notebook whom he had registered on his way to the Elgin marbles. The human neck makes an unmistakable sound when it is snapped, and he heard it now. The agent slumped to the ground. Kurst walked out into the fresh air.

There were people running between the pillars, tumbling down the steps, and hurling themselves across the open area in front of the building. Already the police were on their way, their sirens growing in volume as they came together from different parts of the city. Kurst's limou-

sine was waiting for him at the gate. But there were two men moving purposefully toward him, both dressed in charcoal gray suits and sunglasses. He briefly wondered why people who worked in espionage had to make themselves look so obvious. They had become aware of the chaos inside the British Museum and were racing in. Perhaps they hadn't expected him to emerge so quickly.

Kurst lifted his walking stick. It was in fact a hollowed-out tube with a single gas-fired bullet and an electric trigger concealed just beneath the handle. The bullet had been specially modified. It wouldn't just kill a man. It would tear him in half.

He fired. The man on the left was blown off his feet, landing in a spinning, bloody ball. The second man froze for just one second. It was much too long. Moving surprisingly fast for someone of his age, Kurst swung the walking stick through the air, using it like a sword. The metal casing slammed into the agent's throat and he crumpled instantly. Kurst lumbered toward the car. The passenger door was already open and he threw himself in, slamming it behind him. There was a series of gunshots. But the car windows were bulletproof and the bodywork was armor-plated. With a screech of tires, the limousine swung out. Another man stood in the way, his gun held commando-style in both hands. He fired once. The bullet slammed into the window right in front of Kurst's face, leaving a dent and a spider's web of cracks. The chauffeur

accelerated. There was a thud as the man hit the fender and he was hurled out of the way.

Two hours later, a man in a blond wig, wearing sunglasses and holding a huge bunch of flowers, boarded the Eurostar train to Paris. Zeljan Kurst hated these disguises, but it was something else he had learned in his long career. If you're trying not to be seen, it often helps to make yourself as prominent as possible. The flowers and the wig were ridiculous, and although the police and MI6 were looking for him all over London, they certainly wouldn't associate them with him.

As he settled into his prebooked seat in first class and sipped his complimentary glass of champagne, Kurst's mind was focused on the problem he had been given. The shoot-out at the museum was already forgotten. The question was—who would be the best person to handle this quite interesting business of the Elgin marbles? There were now twelve members of Scorpia, including him, and he mentally went over them one by one.

Levi Kroll, the former Israeli agent who, in a moment of carelessness, had shot out his own eye? Mikato, the Japanese policeman turned Yakuza gangster? Dr. Three? Or perhaps this might be an opportunity for their newest recruit. He had the sort of mind that would enjoy working out a problem of this complexity, along with the ruthlessness to see it through to the end.

There was a blast of a whistle and the train moved off.

Kurst took out his mobile phone—encrypted, of course—and dialed a number. The train slid down the platform and picked up speed, and as they left King’s Cross International, Kurst permitted himself the rare luxury of a smile. Yes. Razim was perfect. He would bring his unique talents to this new assignment. Kurst was sure of it. He had chosen exactly the right man.

THE MEASUREMENT OF PAIN

“THANK YOU. THANK YOU. Thank you, my dear Mr. Kurst. I will begin to consider the matter at once.”

The man with the silver hair flipped shut his mobile phone and slid it into the top pocket of his dishdasha—the long-sleeved white cotton dress worn by most Arab men. He stood for a moment, savoring the air. It was a cool night, but then of course this was only February. Two months from now and the temperature would rise into the eighties . . . considerably more during the day. He looked up at the stars. There were just a few of them tonight, but they shone with more intensity than any stars in the world. He never tired of their beauty, and of course, living here in the middle of the Sahara Desert in Egypt, there was no light pollution and he could see them more clearly than anywhere else.

The sun had set two hours ago, but there was still a deep, unearthly blue glow in the sky on the edge of the horizon. Looking out across the desert, he could just make out the pale gray of the salt lakes that were spread out all around. For this was the Siwa Oasis, 350 miles from Cairo, a place that owed its existence to the fluke of there being water in the desert, not just the salt lakes but freshwater wells and thermal springs, bubbling up from

the bowels of the earth. Ten miles away, he could just make out the glimmering streetlights that signaled the town of Siwa. Apart from a few hotels, shops, and Internet cafés, there wasn't very much there, and the man visited the town as seldom as possible. Nobody from the town ever came here.

The man was standing on the parapet of a French fort, built at the end of the eighteenth century when Napoleon had invaded Egypt. A few new buildings had been added more recently, and there were signs of further construction . . . scaffolding, construction equipment, and a great pile of salt that had been drawn from the lake and would be mixed with sand to make bricks.

There was something very strange about the compound, which stood on its own, perfectly square, surrounded by sand. It looked like something out of a Hollywood movie . . . or perhaps a mirage. First, there was the outer wall, not high but several feet thick, with battlements all the way around and solid guard towers rising up much farther at each of the four corners. These were punctuated by narrow, slotlike windows, making it easy to look out but impossible to look in. The only way into the fort was through an arched gateway with an oak door—it was made of whole tree trunks bound with steel and it would have taken several men to open if it hadn't been electrically operated.

Inside, the fort was like an army barracks with a dozen buildings neatly laid out around a central well. Water, of

course, was everything in the desert. An army would be able to survive here for months—living, sleeping, exercising, and drilling on the parade ground, hardly aware of the world outside. There were two accommodation blocks—one for officers, one for common soldiers—a prison block, various storerooms, a bakery, and a chapel. All of these had been converted with air-conditioning, hot and cold running water, every modern comfort. The old stables had been turned into a recreation room with snooker tables and a cinema screen. The armory still contained weapons—though very different from the ones used by the forces of Napoleon.

These included flamethrowers, hand grenades, and even handheld rocket launchers . . . for the man who had privately purchased the fort and redesigned it needed to be safe, and beneath the sun-baked bricks, the dusty courtyard, and the ancient battlements lay some very sophisticated equipment indeed. Everything was powered by an electric generator housed in what had once been the forge. A radio mast and three satellite dishes rose above one of the towers. Television cameras watched for any movement. At night, infrared lights and radar scanned the area all around. All of these were wired into the control room, once the bakery, with a single chimney rising above a flat roof, leading up from what had once been the bread oven. The control room was manned twenty-four hours a day, and nobody could enter or leave without authorization—the main gate could be opened only from

inside. It was in constant radio communication with the guards on patrol. These were local men, dressed in Bedouin style, with headdresses, loose-fitting robes, sandals, and knives at their belts. They also had machine guns slung over their shoulders.

The man's name was Abdul-Aziz Al-Rahim, but that wasn't what he called himself now. As an internationally wanted terrorist and convicted war criminal, it was better not to have any name at all. In the end, he had jumbled up letters from his name and come up with Razim—which was how he was known to his friends in Scorpia. And in truth, he had no other friends. He was unmarried. Sometimes he would spend a whole month without speaking to anyone at all. But Razim didn't mind. In fact, he preferred it that way.

Razim was not an Egyptian. He had been born forty-five years ago in the town of Tikrit, in Iraq. His father was a university professor. His mother had studied Arabic literature at the University of Cambridge and had herself become a well-known writer and poet. Abdul-Aziz (the name means "servant of the powerful" in Arabic) was one of two children—he had an older sister named Rima. The family lived together in one of the oldest houses of the city, a narrow, white brick building constructed around a central courtyard packed with flowers and plants and with a fountain playing in the middle.

From the very start, Razim was a difficult child. His father used to joke that he had been born in a sandstorm

and that some of the sand must have gotten into his blood. As a baby, he never smiled or gurgled but lay sullenly in his cot as if wondering how he had got there and how, perhaps, he might escape. As soon as he learned to walk, he tried to run away. Nannies never stayed long in the household. Razim's temper tantrums drove three of them away. The fourth left with a pair of nail scissors driven into her thigh after she had told him off for teasing his sister.

At least he did well at school . . . indeed, his teachers thought that he was a genius. He came top in every subject and by the age of twelve was almost fluent in three languages. It was hardly surprising that he didn't get along with the other children. Even then Razim had no friends, but he preferred it that way. He was a quiet, solitary boy, and he had already come to realize that there was something different about him, even though he wasn't quite sure what it was. Eventually, though, after considerable thought, he managed to work it out. He had no emotions. Nothing scared him or upset him. Nothing made him particularly happy either. There was no food that he particularly enjoyed. It was as if the whole of life had been put under a laboratory slide and he was the scientist examining it. Every day for him was the same. He didn't feel anything.

He decided to put this to the test. His parents had bought him a pet, a scruffy mongrel, when he was small and it had always been his companion. So one day he

took it down to the orchard behind his parents' house and strangled it, just to see how he felt. It didn't bother him at all. His mother and father wondered about the missing dog, and they also noticed the scratches on Razim's hands and arms, but they accepted his explanation that he had brushed against a barbed-wire fence. They were both intelligent people, but no parent wants to think the worst of their child, and the truth was that Razim was still doing brilliantly at school. He ate his meals with them and came with them to the mosque for family prayers. He clearly didn't like his sister but he was polite to her. What more could they ask?

In 1979, the history of Iraq changed when Saddam Hussein came to power. One of his first acts as president was to arrest sixty-eight members of his party and accuse them of treason. Twenty-two of them were executed. The other forty-six were forced to make up the firing squads. When Razim heard about this little twist of cruelty, he realized that his country had been taken over by a man who was very close to his own heart. He began to think how he might get to meet him. Could he find a way into the corridors of power?

As it happened, the opportunity arose very quickly. It was obvious to many people in Iraq that Saddam was brutal, mad, and dangerous, and in the late summer of that same year, Razim's parents held a secret meeting in their house with other academics, writers, and well-placed friends to discuss how they might get rid of him.

How were they to know that Razim was recording the entire conversation on a tape recorder that they had given him for his fourteenth birthday? The next day, he skipped school and went instead to the local police, taking the evidence with him.

Revenge came like a desert storm. Razim's parents were arrested and shot without even the benefit of a trial. Razim never found out what happened to his seventeen-year-old sister—nor did he care. The last he saw of her, she was being dragged screaming from the house by four laughing policemen who threw her into the back of a van. Everyone who had attended the meeting was arrested. None of them was ever seen again.

As a reward for his loyalty, the local chief of police invited Razim—who was of course an orphan now—to see him in his office above the jail near the Farouk Palace. Sitting behind his desk, with his belly rising above it, the police chief examined the boy who had been brought to him. He did not like what he saw. Razim was small for his age and very slender, more like a girl than a boy. His hair was neatly cut in a fringe and he was wearing his school uniform. But what troubled him was the boy's complete lack of expression. He had the face of a waxwork, eyes that could have been made of glass. There was no warmth or curiosity. There was nothing at all.

Even so, he tried to be polite. "You have been of great service to your country," he began. "Your parents and their friends were traitors. You were right to do what you did."

The boy didn't respond.

"What would you like to happen to you now?"

"I thought I might join the police," Razim said. "I'm sure you have lots of people you have to kill. I'd like to help."

The police chief had children of his own, and this boy, whose feet barely reached the floor, sickened him. "You're too young to join the police," he said.

"I don't want to go back to school. It's boring."

"I think it would be better if you left Tikrit."

For a brief moment, the police chief was tempted to take out his gun and shoot the child. There was no particular reason. He would have felt exactly the same if he had found himself faced with a scorpion or a poisonous snake. He had to hold on to his hand to prevent it from dropping down to the holster at his belt. "We will arrange for you to be fostered," he said. "Somewhere far away."

"Don't I get a reward?"

"It will come to you. In time."

In the end, Razim was sent to live with a wealthy family, distant relatives of the president, in Tehran. The family despised him on first sight but knew better than to ask any questions, and from this moment on he began to thrive. He continued to do brilliantly at school and at seventeen became the youngest student to enter the College of Engineering at Amir Adaad Campus, part of the University of Tehran. By now he had changed his mind about his future. He would use his scientific skills to

become a weapons designer. It was well known that Saddam Hussein was developing biological and chemical weapons. Razim himself had a keen interest in small arms. In his first term at university, he had won a commendation for a twenty-page essay on the Yugoslavian Zastava M70, the assault rifle that, he was told, had been used to kill his parents. His dream was that he might one day invent a new weapon that he would name after himself.

It wasn't going to happen. On Razim's eighteenth birthday, he received a letter printed on official government paper. It turned out that someone high up hadn't forgotten the teenager who had once betrayed his entire family. Razim was to leave the university immediately. He was being invited (and it wasn't an invitation that anyone could refuse) to join the Mukhabarat. He was to report to their offices the next day.

The Mukhabarat. Iraq's dreaded secret intelligence service. Razim read the letter with the faint twinge of something that might actually have been pleasure. He had heard the horror stories about the organization and he knew that it was work to which he was ideally suited. He packed immediately and left at six o'clock the next morning. Nobody at the university even noticed he had gone.

For the next twenty years, Razim discovered the pleasure of being feared. Actually, it was more than that. Anyone who met him knew that he had absolute power over their life or death and that with one snap of his fingers they would never be seen again. If he were to point to a

picture or a valuable vase in a man's house, the object would be waiting at the door for him to take with him when he left. The same was true for the man's wife or son. Razim boasted that he had so many enemies that he could have bathed daily in their blood. The rumor in Tehran was that he actually did.

His power increased. Soon he had a house the size of a palace, filled with servants who fell silent and looked away when he came into the room. He had barely grown at all. He was still the same size and shape as a schoolboy, but rather curiously, his hair had turned silver while he was in his twenties, making him look both very old and very young at the same time. He also wore round, wire-framed glasses, and one of his officers had once joked that he looked like a Middle Eastern Harry Potter. Razim had enjoyed the joke. He was almost smiling as he stabbed the officer nine times with a paper knife.

And then came the Iraq war of 2003 and the invasion by the American and British forces. Unlike so many of Saddam's inner circle, Razim could see which way the wind was blowing and made plans to save himself. The night before the bombing of Baghdad, he slipped out of the country on the private eight-seater Beechjet 400 that actually belonged to the president's younger brother, flying over the border into Saudi Arabia. He took with him all the treasures he could carry . . . artwork, diamonds, gold coins, and international bonds. All these would be easier to trade than cash.

He settled in Riyadh and waited for the war to end,

which it did—as he had expected—very quickly. It was clear to him that he couldn't return to Iraq, not while it was being occupied by the British and American forces, but using the connections he had made while he was with the Mukhabarat, he contacted the local recruiting officer for Al-Qaeda and soon found himself in charge of his own extensive terrorist cell. He wasn't paid, of course, but then he didn't need to be. He was a wealthy man. Nor was he interested in religion or politics. For him, terrorism was like a jigsaw puzzle. You have an embassy and a bomb. How do you fit one into the other to create the most unforgettable picture? It was a challenge that stimulated his mind, and he helped plan more than a dozen attacks in Europe and America, carefully examining the results on the fifty-five-inch plasma screen he'd had installed in his luxurious house.

This successful period in his life came to an end when his commanding officer suggested that, to show his devotion to the Islamic cause, he might like to become a suicide bomber himself. Razim was given a belt filled with high explosive and shown how to wrap it around his stomach and set it off with a single button on his mobile phone. He would be smuggled into Pakistan and dropped off at a central market. From there, it would be a short step to Paradise.

Razim thought about all this for a few minutes, then used the explosive to blow up his commanding officer. It was time to move again. By now, the British and Ameri-

cans were on his trail. Saddam had been hanged. Saddam's sons had been shot. Razim had no doubt that one or another of these fates would be waiting for him if he was ever caught . . . unless, that is, Al-Qaeda found him first. It really was quite annoying to have so many enemies. He would just have to find another city where he could start his life again.

He chose Cairo. With a population of seven million crammed into eighty-three square miles, he would be completely invisible. He briefly considered plastic surgery. There were plenty of clinics in the backstreets of West Zamalek, a high-rise area of the city on the edge of the Nile, and if you paid enough, nobody would ask any questions. But in fact very few people knew what he looked like. He had taken great care that this should be the case, always covering his head with the traditional *ghutra*, or Arab scarf. When he was in Western dress, he had worn sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled down low. He decided that surgery would not be needed. He lived quietly, making sure he didn't attract any attention. And he waited for the next opportunity to reveal itself, as he was sure it would.

He still owned a penthouse apartment in the center of Cairo and a summerhouse in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. But his favorite home was where he was now, this long-forgotten fort lost in 1.2 million square miles of sand. This was where he came to get away from the crowds. It was where he felt more secure. And it was a

perfect setting, too, for the series of experiments in which he was now engaged.

There was a rope bridge that crossed from one side of the complex to the other. Razim had ordered it to be installed to save him walking all the way around. He crossed it now, putting out two hands to steady himself as it swayed beneath his feet. The salt pile was right beneath him now, and he watched as one of the guards emptied a wheelbarrow, adding to the heap. Razim had insisted that the new building be done in the traditional Berber style, mixing salt with sand. It was slow—but it felt right.

Everything was quiet. The desert had settled for the night. He reached the other end of the bridge and walked along the opposite parapet until he came to a stone staircase that led back down to ground level. He took it. A second guard stood respectfully to attention as he walked past.

Razim still didn't know how Scorpia had managed to track him down. At first it had worried him. If they could find him, then any one of the world's intelligence agencies might follow. But he had soon realized that Scorpia was an organization like no other. After all, by and large the police and security services do not threaten murder or violence to get the information they want. And in the end, he was glad that they had decided to seek him out. They were offering exactly the sort of work that interested him along with the promise of enormous sums of money. The two of them really were made for each other.

Take this new assignment, the first he would handle as project leader. It was already a fascinating challenge: how to return the Elgin marbles to Greece. Like Zeljan Kurst, Razim had already dismissed the idea of stealing them, although that would surely have been easy enough. When was the last time anyone had checked security at the British Museum? Many of the roofs were made of glass and the security staff, low paid and lazy, could be either bribed or replaced. But that wouldn't work. If the marbles were ever to be seen in public again, then they would have to be returned legally, with the full cooperation of the British government. So what it came down to was a question of leverage. How could Scorpia persuade them to do something that they had always refused to do?

He took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. He smoked Black Devil cigarettes, manufactured in China and sold by the long-established firm of Heupink and Bloemen in the Netherlands. He had the packs specially modified so that they no longer warned him that he would quite probably die of cancer. Razim didn't really care when he died—or how. But he didn't like being bossed around by governments. He sucked in, letting the sweet, slightly vanilla taste of the tobacco roll around his tongue.

Small clouds of dust rose around his feet as he crossed the courtyard. The beam of the spotlight swept the ground just ahead. Still smoking, he went into a circular building with a domed roof and a tower. This had once been a chapel. Razim had found faded pictures of various saints

on some of the walls and there was even a stained-glass window—the only glass in the entire place. Perhaps French soldiers had come here once to pray that they would soon be sent home. Razim had smashed the window and painted over the frescoes. They were of no interest to him. He had, of course, never believed in God.

The interior was brightly lit and kept at a pleasant temperature by a sophisticated air-conditioning system. The walls were now all white and purposefully thick, to keep out the heat. There were machines everywhere: computers, television monitors, different-sized boxes with dials and gauges. In the middle of all this, trapped in a pool of brilliant light, a man sat in a leather dentist's chair, tied to it by soft cords around his ankles and wrists. The man was wearing only boxer shorts. Dozens of wires had been attached to him—to his head, his chest, his pulse, his abdomen—held in place by sticky tape. By a happy coincidence, the man was French. He was about thirty years old and he was trying not to look afraid. He was failing.

Razim knew his name. It was Luc Fontaine and he worked for the DGSE, which is the French intelligence agency dealing in external security. The man was, in other words, a secret agent, a spy. Razim had always known that foreign investigators would come looking for him and he therefore kept a careful lookout for them. This one had actually gotten closer than many. He had been picked up asking questions in the central market—

or souk—knocked out and then brought here. He was still pretending to be a tourist, but only halfheartedly. By now he knew that he was in the hands of a man who did not make mistakes.

There was a trolley covered with a white cloth next to the dentist's chair. Razim wheeled it around and uncovered it to reveal a series of knives lined up in neat rows, each one a different shape and size, gleaming in the harsh light. There were other instruments too: swabs and silver bowls, hypodermic syringes, vials containing liquids that were colorless but somehow didn't look like water. Fontaine saw this. He tried not to show any emotion. But his naked skin crawled.

Razim pulled up a stool and sat down. He drew on the cigarette. The tip glowed.

"What do you want?" Fontaine asked. He spoke in French. His voice was hoarse.

Razim didn't answer.

"I'm not going to tell you anything." The secret agent had dropped the pretense that he was a tourist. He knew there was no longer any point in it.

"And I am not going to ask you anything," Razim replied. His French was excellent. It was one of the languages he had learned at school. "You have no information that I wish to know."

"Then why am I here?" The young man flexed his arms, the muscles rising, but the cords held fast.

"I will tell you." Razim tapped ash into one of the

bowls. "I have been many things in my life," he said, "but when I set out, I was an engineer. That is how I was trained. Science, in its many varieties, has always been an interest of mine. And you should be glad that you are here with me tonight, Luc. Do you mind if I call you Luc? I am pursuing a project that will be of great benefit to the world, and fate has chosen you to help me."

"My people know I'm here."

"Nobody knows you are here. Even you do not know where you are. Please try not to interrupt."

Razim put out his cigarette. He licked his lips.

"It occurred to me some years ago that everything in this world is measured and that many of these measurements have been named after the great engineers. The most obvious example is the watt, which measures electricity, and which was named after James Watt, the inventor of the modern steam engine. Joule and Newton were both physicists and have been immortalized in the measurement of energy . . . joules and newtons. Every day we measure the atmospheric heat in either Fahrenheit or Celsius. The first was a German physicist, the second a Swedish astronomer.

"We measure distance and height and speed and brightness. If you wish to buy anything from a shoe to a sheet of paper, you ask for it by size. There are measuring units that many people have never heard of. Can you tell me what a pyron is? Or a palmo? Or a petaflop? But here is the strange thing. There has never been a mea-

surement for something we experience almost every day of our lives.

“There has never been a measurement for pain.

“Can you imagine how useful it would be if you went to the dentist and he was able to reassure you? ‘Don’t worry, my dear fellow, this is going to hurt only two and a half units.’ Or if you went to the doctor with a damaged knee and were able to tell him that it hurt three units down here—but seven-point-five units up here, above the knee? Of course, it is very difficult to measure pain. It all depends on how our nerves react and what the stimulus is—the knife, electricity, fire, acid—that has caused the pain. But I still believe it is possible to develop a universal scale. And I very much hope that one day the unit of pain will indeed be named after me. The Razim. And people will be able to say exactly how many Razims will result in certain death.”

Fontaine was staring at Razim as if seeing him for the first time. “You’re mad,” he whispered.

“All the great inventors have a certain madness,” Razim agreed. “They said the same of Galileo and Einstein. It is what I would expect you to say.”

“Please . . .”

“I would also expect you to beg. But I’m afraid it will do you no good.”

Razim leaned over the trolley and considered. It would be interesting to see how long this Frenchman would survive. Of course, for the sake of accuracy, he would have

to experiment on women. And if one ever came his way, a teenager would be useful too. Everybody reacts to pain in different ways and he needed to examine the full spectrum. He made his decision and chose an instrument.

Moments later, the needles on the various monitors leapt forward as the first screams rang out into the night.



FLY - BY - NIGHT

THE TOURIST BOAT WAS MOORED at the Quai de la Loire, on the very western edge of the city. But the people who stepped on board four months later on a bright afternoon in June most definitely were not tourists.

It had been Max Grendel, the oldest member of Scorpia, who had decided that they should have a floating office in Paris. This had been one of the last decisions he had made, as he had died a few months later, stung to death in a gondola in Venice. The *bateau-mouche*—literally “fly boat”—looked like any one of the pleasure craft gliding up and down the river. It was long and narrow with a flat bottom and a low canopy made almost entirely of glass to give its passengers the best possible views. Inside, however, it was very different. Instead of rows of seating for two or three hundred sightseers, there was a single conference table and twelve chairs. A sound-proof wall separated this area from the cabin where the captain and the first mate stood at the controls. The rest of the crew, four men in their twenties, stayed on the deck. They were not allowed to look into the cabin. They stood as still as the statues that lined the bridges, their eyes fixed on both banks of the river, searching for any movement that might be construed as enemy action.

Grendel's idea wasn't quite as odd as it might seem. Unlike a building, a boat would be impossible to bug, particularly as it was kept under twenty-four-hour guard and thoroughly swept before any meeting. Also, unlike a building, it could move, so anyone trying to eavesdrop on what was being said would have to move too, at equal speed. And as the ship was fitted with a Ruston 12RK diesel engine stolen from a Royal Navy River Class Patrol Vessel, that might be very fast indeed. Finally, should a police launch attempt to come close, there was a point-defense weapon system based on the famous Goalkeeper technology developed by the Dutch, with autocannon and advanced radar concealed beneath false panels on the foredeck. This was capable of firing seventy rounds per second at a distance of up to 1500 meters. If necessary, Scorpia was both willing and able to start a small war in the heart of Paris.

The ship was called *Le Débiteur*, which might be translated as "someone who leaves without paying their debts." Such people used to be called fly-by-nights.

As Grendel had argued, there would be something very calming about discussing business while cruising past some of the most beautiful buildings in Europe, particularly when the business was as dangerous as theirs.

Sabotage. Corruption. Intelligence. And assassination. These were the four activities that had given Scorpia its name. It was actually here in Paris that it had been formed, a collection of intelligence agents from around

the world who had seen that their services might no longer be needed after the end of the Cold War and who had decided to go into business for themselves. It had been a wise move. Secret agents are generally very badly paid. For example, the head of MI5 in England receives only two hundred thousand a year—a tiny amount compared with any investment banker. Every member of Scorpia had multiplied his annual income by a factor of ten. And none of them paid any tax.

There were now twelve of them and they were all men. There had once been a woman on the executive committee, but she had been killed in London and had never been replaced. Altogether, six of them had died—one from natural causes. The current chief executive was Zelman Kurst, sitting at one end of the table in a charcoal gray suit, white shirt, and black tie. As he had explained in London, Scorpia had recently taken on four new recruits—although they had been forced to look outside the intelligence community. There was a ginger-haired Irishman who called himself Seamus and had been with the IRA. A pair of twin brothers had been brought in from the Italian mafia. And finally there was Razim.

Scorpia was on the way up. That was the message they wanted to make clear to the world. They were taking back the control they should never have lost.

The twelve executives arrived individually and at five-minute intervals, some in chauffeured cars, some on foot, one even on a bicycle. Only Giovanni and Eduardo

Grimaldi, the twins, arrived together, but then, in twenty-five years they had never spent a minute apart. At exactly three o'clock, the deckhands lifted the anchor. The captain pushed forward on the throttle and *Le Débiteur* slipped out onto the river, beginning its journey east toward the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame.

Zeljan Kurst waited until they were on their way before he spoke. He didn't greet anyone by name. Such matters were a waste of words. Nor did he offer anyone a drink, not even a glass of water. None of these people trusted each other, so they would only have refused it anyway. If he had any recollection of his narrow escape in London, he didn't show it. His eyes were heavy. He almost looked bored.

"Good day to you, gentlemen," he began. As usual, the English language sounded peculiarly ugly coming out of his lips, but it had long since been agreed that English was the only language they would speak. "We have come together today to agree upon our tactics for an operation that we have called Horseman and that will earn us the sum of forty million dollars when it is successfully completed. As you all know, I have given the management of this business to Mr. Razim."

Kurst glanced sideways. As he had expected, there was a brief flash of anger in the single eye of the Israeli agent, Levi Kroll. This was the third time he had been passed over for project command. Nobody else had noticed. Their attention was fixed on the man with the silver

hair and the round spectacles who had been placed, not by accident, at the head of the table.

“I will add only that the first installment of the money has been paid into our Cayman Islands account by our client, Ariston Xenopolos,” Kurst continued. “We will receive the full amount on the same day that the so-called Elgin marbles land on Greek soil.”

“How is Ariston?” Dr. Three asked. He was very small, like many Chinese men, and as the years went by he seemed to be getting smaller. He had recently completed a two-thousand-page encyclopedia on the subject of torture. The writing had exhausted him although he had enjoyed the research.

“He is critically ill,” Kurst replied. “According to his doctors, he should already be dead.”

“And if he dies before our work is complete?”

“The money will still be paid.” Kurst blinked heavily, as if to cut off any further discussion. “But it is not just a question of money for us,” he went on. “This is a matter of great importance. We have endured two failures in a single year . . . unheard of in our long history. And I have heard unpleasant whispers, gentlemen. There are some governments and intelligence agencies that no longer trust us with their assignments. The purchase of nuclear material for Iran. A terrorist atrocity in Tel Aviv. The collapse of the banking system in Singapore. Just three recent operations that should have come to us but instead have been given to other organizations. We have to prove

to our clients that we are back at full strength—and this is our opportunity! The work that we begin here today will have echoes that will be heard and felt throughout the world.”

He nodded in the direction of Razim. “Please. Tell the committee what you have planned.”

“With great pleasure, Mr. Kurst.” Razim licked his lips. *Pleasure* was not a word he used often. It was not an emotion that was familiar to him. And yet he had been looking forward to this moment for a long time, and he felt something close to a thrill to be the one holding the reins, to be in command of the entire executive body of Scorpia. “The Elgin marbles,” he muttered, his voice barely audible above the drone of the motor. “The British government has refused, time and again, to hand them back. Why? Because they are selfish and arrogant. And the question I have been asking myself for the last few months is, what will make them overcome their selfishness and arrogance? What will make them change their mind? And the answer I have come up with is a single word. Fear.

“Somehow we have to arrange matters so that they have no choice. We have to put them in a position where they *must* return the sculptures . . . where their survival depends on it. But at the same time, it has to be done very delicately. For example, we could steal a nuclear device and threaten to set it off in the heart of London if they did not comply with our wishes. But this would not be easy and it might not even work. They might not believe us.

They might, as it were, call our bluff. And it is not our task to turn the British into victims, no matter how pleasant the thought. It will suit our purposes more if they are hated. They are thieves and aggressors. They deserve the condemnation of every civilized country.”

Razim drew a breath. There were twenty-one eyes in the room and they were all turned on him. Outside, the boat was cutting through the bright water, heading toward a bend in the river with the Eiffel Tower and the Fields of Mars looming up on the right. They passed underneath a bridge, the Pont d’Iéna, and a bar of shadow swept briefly across the glass ceiling.

“I do not believe violence, or the threat of violence, is the answer,” Razim went on. “But suppose we were to arrange a trap for them. Imagine that we were to arrange a scandal so dark and so shocking that it would destroy their reputation for decades to come. No countries would do business with them. The Americans would turn their backs on them. The European community already hates them, but this would be the final straw. Nobody would trust them. Suddenly, Great Britain would be a very small and lonely island indeed. Imagine all that, my friends, and ask yourselves what the British government would do to avoid it. Do you think, perhaps, they would agree to empty one room in a stupid museum in the middle of London? Would they cheerfully send a collection of old statues back to their rightful owners? I think they would. I really think they would.”

Razim longed for a cigarette. He could feel the pack pressing inside his jacket pocket—for today he was wearing European dress—but he dared not reach for it. It wasn't that smoking was forbidden. It was just that it might be considered a weakness.

"I have already put into operation a plan that will achieve all this," he said. "It is the sort of exercise that carries the unmistakable stamp and authority of Scorpia. And from what I have been told, I think it will give everyone around this table a great deal of personal satisfaction because, gentlemen, what I have in mind involves a young boy . . ."

He paused for effect.

"The boy's name is Alex Rider."

There was a moment of perfect silence. Even the engines seemed to have stopped. The last two words seemed to have had a paralyzing effect on at least half the people in the cabin.

"Alex Rider?" Sitting next to Kroll, the Japanese man called Mr. Mikato raised a thumb to his lips and bit at the nail. As he did so, he exposed the diamond set in his front tooth. Mikato was a member of the criminal organization known as the Yakuza and had tattooed the names of every man he had killed across his body. Unfortunately, he had run out of space. "We have encountered this boy twice," he began. "We even tried to kill him with a bullet fired into his heart. The sniper that we hired had never failed—"

"Please, hear me out," Razim interrupted. "I have

given the matter a great deal of thought.” Suddenly he decided—to hell with it. He took out his pack of Black Devils and lit one with a solid gold lighter. Smoke curled in front of his face, reflected in the two circles of his glasses.

“I am perfectly aware that Alex Rider has, incredibly, gotten the better of this organization on two occasions,” he said. “There was a fairly simple affair involving the creation of a tsunami to strike the coast of Australia. And before that, the late Mrs. Rothman was responsible for the operation called Invisible Sword. This was a secret weapon using nanoshells with a cyanide core. The plan was to poison every child in Britain.”

“We do not need to discuss these matters!” There was a Frenchman at the table, a man with a neat gray beard and the long, slender fingers of a pianist. He was rolling his knuckles across the wooden surface, a sign of his irritation.

“But we do need to discuss them, Monsieur Duval,” Razim replied. “How can we understand our one weakness if we don’t examine it?” He waved a hand. “There is absolutely nothing special about this child *except that he is a child*. That’s the reason why he has been so useful to MI6. Oh yes, he received some training from his uncle, who was a spy himself before he was killed. But do you really think a basic knowledge of karate and the ability to speak a few foreign languages were the reasons he managed to defeat you?”

“That’s nonsense! Alex Rider won because you underestimated him. Winston Yu should have shot him when he had the chance. And Mrs. Rothman too. Maybe they hesitated because he was so young, but that was his strength. He was the world’s most unlikely spy. It didn’t matter if it was the island of Skeleton Key or Sayle Enterprises in Cornwall, nobody looked at him twice. That was their mistake.”

“And our mistake . . . ,” Kroll began. He had been listening to all this in growing discomfort. Alone at the table, he was allowing his emotions to get the better of him. Zeljan Kurst had noticed this. It was what he had expected.

“Let me finish!” Razim cut him off. “I have done a great deal of research into this child. I managed to see a copy of a report prepared by a journalist last year and it confirmed what I had already found out for myself. On at least six occasions—it may be more—he was employed by the Special Operations Division of MI6. Gentlemen, I ask you to consider the implications.

“Everyone in this room knows only too well that secret agents—spies—aren’t really heroes. The work they do is often dirty and unpleasant. They kill people who have to be killed and they do it without a second thought. They have no pity and no sense of shame. They share the sorts of secrets that nobody else wants to know. Do spies have friends? Of course not. Nobody in their right mind would want to get close to them. They cannot be trusted.

“So what would happen if it was discovered that MI6 had recruited a fourteen-year-old schoolboy! Too young to vote. Too young to smoke or get married. But old enough to be sent to foreign countries, to get mixed up in international politics, terrorism, and murder! What would that say about that country’s government—or its secret service?”

“And let us take it one step further. Suppose the boy was sent on a mission that went horribly wrong. But this time it wasn’t something brave or clever. He wasn’t trying to save the world from some madman like Damian Cray. He wasn’t protecting British children from a lethal virus hidden inside a computer. No. This time, he was involved in something that the entire world would condemn.” As Razim spoke, some of the people around the table were becoming more alert, nodding as they followed the thread of what he was saying. “And let us also imagine that during the course of this mission, the boy was actually killed.” This brought smiles and a few murmurs of approval. “Suddenly we have a situation. A fourteen-year-old is shot to death by the police in the streets of a major city. There are documents in his pockets. Perhaps he is carrying a gun that can be traced back to London. All the evidence proves, beyond any doubt, that he was working for MI6. Think for a minute what the result of all this would be.”

“It would be covered up,” Mr. Mikato said. “There isn’t a newspaper that would dare to print such a story.”

“Quite possibly. But we would have all the evidence. Scorpia would have collected e-mails, phone intercepts, photographs, voice recordings. We would have in our hands a bomb that we could detonate at any time. And the result would be that the reputation of the British government would be destroyed. It would be forced to dismantle its own secret service. The prime minister would resign. And no civilized country would want to do business with Britain for decades to come.”

There was a long silence. By now *Le Débiteur* had passed the Eiffel Tower and turned the corner past the Quai d’Orsay. If anyone on the boat had looked out the window, they would have seen the gardens of the Tuileries stretching out on the right bank with the Louvre Museum just beyond. They would have seen couples strolling on the paths between shrubs and fountains that had been arranged so perfectly that it was as if they had been designed by a mathematician rather than a gardener. But nobody was interested in the view. They were all focused on Razim, turning over what he had just said.

“Let me get this straight . . .” The man who had spoken was fair haired, dressed casually in jeans and an open-neck shirt. His name was Brendan Chase and he had once been the paymaster for ASIS—the Australian Secret Intelligence Service—until one afternoon when, after a drinking session, he had boarded a plane with four hundred thousand dollars of his agency’s money stuffed into his backpack. “Somehow you’re going to persuade

MI6 to send Alex Rider on a mission. You're going to make sure that the mission goes wrong and the boy is killed. Well, I'm with you there. If you want a volunteer, I'll be glad to fire the bullet myself. You're then going to blackmail them. We have all the evidence. We have the photographs and the recordings. We'll make them public unless you persuade your government to send the Elgin marbles back to Greece. Is that about it?"

"You have expressed it with perfect clarity, Mr. Chase."

"Okay. But this is what I don't understand. How are you going to do it? These photographs, for example. Are you going to forge them? They'll have to be pretty good if they're going to stand up to examination."

"I don't intend to forge anything."

"So how are you going to get the British secret service to play along?"

Razim tapped ash onto the surface of the table. His fingernail was stained yellow with nicotine. "Any forgery is out of the question," he continued. "We have to be cleverer than that. But actually I believe that it will be perfectly possible for us to arrange all the pieces on the board so that we control the entire game. At the moment, gentlemen, we have the upper hand. British intelligence has no idea of our intentions. And the truth is, they are a great deal less intelligent than they might believe. Alan Blunt has been in charge for too long. The same is true of his deputy, Mrs. Jones. We have extensive files on the two of them and I have been examining them closely.

There are certain patterns of behavior. That is to say, they have become predictable. I think that it will be fairly simple to manipulate them. We will create a trap. And with a little nudging and pushing, they will fall right into it.”

“Alex Rider is fifteen years old now,” Mr. Mikato said. He had taken out a handkerchief and was fanning it across his face. He eyed the cigarette with distaste. “As far as we know, MI6 is no longer using him. Do you really believe that you can persuade them to involve him again?”

“Certainly.” Razim dropped the cigarette and ground it out on the wooden floor. “All we have to do is create the circumstances that will steer them toward that decision.”

“I heard that he refused to work for them again,” Dr. Three said.

“Alex Rider never had any real choice in the matter. He never intended to be a spy in the first place, but he’s been too valuable for MI6 to let him go. What this means is that we don’t actually have to go anywhere near him. If we provide them with the right sort of bait, MI6 will do our work for us. They’re the ones we have to target.”

“What bait do you have in mind?” the Frenchman asked.

Razim glanced briefly at Zeljan Kurst, as if asking for his consent. The bald head nodded very slightly.

“It has to be done one step at a time,” Razim replied. “Our first objective is to get Alex Rider out of England and into a city of our choosing. Although he won’t be aware of it, he will be entering a hall of mirrors, as if in

an amusement park. Every move that he makes will be controlled. Certain doors will be closed to him even as others open up. He will be watched from every angle. But as I say, we have to start with MI6. They are the ones who will draw Alex into our trap.

“So let’s begin with the bait. Let’s say that a dead body is found floating in the River Thames in London. The body is that of a wanted criminal . . . a very important criminal. MI6 has been searching for him for some time. And in his pocket is a letter or some other document. Of course, it’s in code. MI6 sends it to their best scientists and they manage to work out what it means. That is when they discover that an event is taking place in some distant country and that it demands their urgent attention. It is something of world-changing importance. An agent must be sent there at once.”

“It could be any agent,” Mikato interrupted. “Why should they choose the boy?”

“Because the event involves a field of activity in which a child might pass unnoticed. This is the key to the whole thing. I’ve already seen it in the files. The first time MI6 used Rider, it was because he could pass himself off as the winner of a competition in a computer magazine—and this allowed him to infiltrate Herod Sayle’s production plant in Cornwall. The next time, it was the Point Blanc Academy in France, which he could enter as a student, the teenaged son of a multimillionaire. Then he traveled with two American agents to the

island of Skeleton Key. This time he was pretending to be their son and having him with them turned them into an ordinary, happy family. Do you see? There is a pattern. If a teenager is required, they have to choose Alex Rider. There is no one else.”

Another pause. The Italian twins turned briefly to each other and knew at once that they had come to the same decision. Mikato’s face relaxed and he nodded slowly. The Australian smiled to himself.

“*Lakek et hatahat sheli!*” If there was silent agreement in the room, it was Levi Kroll spitting out the vile oath in Hebrew that shattered it. Now he rose to his feet, addressing everyone around the table. “I do not believe what I am hearing!” he roared. His face was livid, the veins on his cheeks standing out. “This is madness. Listen to me. I am not saying that this child is better than us. I do not for a minute believe that he beat us for any other reason than luck. However, let me tell you now that luck has a part to play in our activities. You can plan everything perfectly, but still a small, unforeseen detail can destroy you. A chance meeting in the street. A gun jamming. Bad weather! You know that this is true.

“And Alex Rider has the luck of the devil on his side. How else do you explain the death of Julia Rothman—and Nile, her second-in-command, for that matter? Major Winston Yu was a genius. He ran the most successful snakehead operation in the Far East. But when he came up against Alex Rider, he died and his snakehead fell apart.

There are a dozen ways we can persuade the British to return these worthless statues! I like the idea of a nuclear bomb. We could kidnap a member of the royal family, maybe one of the princes, and send him back one piece at a time until the government agreed to our demands. But I will not agree to take on this child for a third time. Twice was enough. We cannot risk a third humiliation.”

Kroll sat down, breathing heavily.

“Is there anyone else here who shares our colleague’s concerns?” Zeljan Kurst asked.

Like poker players about to reveal their hands, the ten other members of Scorpia eyed each other carefully, but none of them spoke.

“I take it from your silence, then, that you all agree to Mr. Razim’s plan?”

“But I disagree,” Kroll insisted, not waiting for an answer. “And by our own rules, if we are not unanimous, we do not proceed.”

Kurst seemed to consider this. “We might be unanimous,” he purred.

“And how might that happen, Zeljan?” Kroll looked at him curiously, daring him to provide an answer.

Nothing had changed. But the atmosphere inside the conference room was suddenly brittle. The sound of the engines shuddered in the air.

Zeljan Kurst shrugged, his huge shoulders rising and falling a few inches. He ignored Kroll, turning instead to Razim. “You suggested that a criminal might be found

floating in the Thames,” he said. “Might it not be more convincing if it were a member of the executive committee of Scorpia?”

“I think that would be admirable,” Razim replied.

“Forget it!” Kroll was back on his feet again, and as if by magic a gun had appeared in his hand. It was a 9mm SP-21 military pistol, designed by Israel Military Industries. He couldn’t possibly have drawn it from a holster. There must have been a spring mechanism inside his jacket that had delivered it into his hand. He aimed it directly at Zeljan Kurst. There was a wild look in his one eye. “I suspected that you’ve been thinking of getting rid of me,” he murmured. “I’m not surprised. I’ve given more than twenty years to this organization and I knew the sort of reward I could expect. The same reward as Max Grendel. Nobody retires from Scorpia, do they?” He laughed briefly. “Maybe some of the rest of you should consider what future you have here.”

The gun didn’t move, but his eye slid briefly toward the twins and then back again.

“You’re not going to kill me, Zeljan. As you can see, I’ve been prepared for this moment. You think Scorpia is getting stronger? It’s not. It’s finished and the foolishness I’ve heard today proves it. Well, I’m going to be the first to walk out.”

Nobody reacted. It was unheard of for a gun to be produced in the middle of an executive meeting. But they were all confident. Kurst must have known. He must surely have the situation under control.

“You are going to order the captain to bring this boat to the nearest bank and then I am going to leave,” Kroll continued. “You don’t need to worry about me. I have no interest in you anymore. But if any of you ever come after me, I will have stories to tell that will have all of you in jail for longer than any of you can possibly live. Do you understand me?”

Zeljan Kurst’s hands were under the table. Kroll didn’t see his right hand stretch out and press a button in the side of his chair.

“I said . . . do you understand me?”

“I completely understand you,” Kurst replied.

There was the soft tinkle of glass breaking. A hole had appeared in the window just behind Kroll’s head.

Kroll jerked slightly but remained standing. A look of puzzlement spread across his face.

There was a moment’s silence. Then Kurst spoke. “You have been shot in the back of the neck, just above the cervical curve,” he explained. “I’m afraid your spine has been severed and you are, effectively, already dead.”

With an enormous effort, as if knowing this would be the last movement he ever made, Kroll opened his mouth. His hand, with the gun, remained frozen.

“At this moment we are passing the Paris Mint.” Kurst glanced out the window. Sure enough, there was a handsome building with arches and columns stretching for some distance along the waterfront. “I knew of course that you were carrying a gun and suspected you might be foolish enough to try and use it. So I took the precaution

of placing a sniper on the roof. Can you still hear me? I would like to think that you have the consolation of knowing that your death will not be wasted.”

Kroll’s legs gave way and he crashed down into his chair, his head and shoulders slumping forward onto the table. The hole in the back of his head was surprisingly small.

“We will have to put Levi in the refrigerator until the time comes to use him,” Kurst went on. “We do not want to give away the time of his death. And whatever clue it is that we place in his pocket, it will have to be something very ingenious. We want to make MI6 work. The more clever they think they are, the more easily they will fall into our trap.” He glanced again at Razim. “There is something else?”

“Yes.” Like everyone else in the room, Razim seemed completely uninterested in the murder that he had just witnessed. It was as if nothing had happened at all. “We can manipulate MI6. And we can ensure that Alex Rider is brought back into service. Once he is in our hands, it will be a simple matter to kill him, although”—he smiled to himself—“I hope you will allow me a little time with him first. There is an experiment that I would like to try.”

“Just be careful,” the Frenchman said.

“Of course. But there is something else that we need and that I didn’t have time to mention before our unfortunate interruption.” He glanced briefly at the dead man, sprawled forward over the table. “Although I have said

that we cannot forge the evidence, we nonetheless have to be careful. We live in an age of disinformation. That is to say, there isn't a document or a report that anyone trusts. People need to see things with their own eyes. We are going to need to capture Alex Rider on film. I want to be able to show him live on TV before he is discovered, as it were, dead on TV. I want the whole world to be able to see him in action."

"And how will you manage that?" Dr. Three asked.

Razim took out a second cigarette. Nobody was going to ask him to stop smoking. Not now. "Actually, it will be very simple," he drawled. "But it will require the assistance of someone very special . . . someone quite unique. Fortunately, I was able to track this person down and I have already been in communication with him. He has every reason to wish harm to Alex Rider. In fact, he hates Rider more than any of us here.

"I have not yet been able to speak to him about Horseman, but I can assure you that he will be delighted to help us. Although getting him to us is going to be expensive, I have already put a team in place. It will be money well spent.

"All being well, he should be with us at the end of the week. And at that moment, Operation Horseman can begin."

PRISONER 7

THE BOY WALKING ALONG the garden path and up to the front door of the villa was fifteen years old, with light brown hair that swept down over his eye. He had a thin, rather pale face, well-defined cheekbones, and a slender neck. He was wearing jeans, a black sports shirt, and sneakers. Overall, he was slim, but he was also athletic and had clearly spent time working out in the gym. His arms and chest were almost too well developed for someone of his age. From the way he moved, it seemed that he had all the time in the world. He was listening to music on an iPod, the white cable snaking down to his back pocket.

It was a warm day with the sun beating down on the well-kept lawn that stretched out on either side of the path. There was a vegetable patch with onions and carrots already poking through and, curving behind it, an old brick wall with pink climbing roses and passionflowers. The villa itself was built in the Spanish style with very pale yellow weatherboarding and blue shutters. As he approached the door, the boy unplugged his earphones and heard birdsong, along with the chug-chug-chug of an automatic sprinkler system. He stood still for a moment. Close his eyes and he might be in some quiet corner of England, perhaps a village in Dorset or Kent. But glanc-

ing past the garden, he saw the razor-wire fence looming above him. Two guards, both with automatic machine guns, walked past. And once again he was reminded—as if he needed reminding—that he was far from home, in one of the strangest prisons in the world.

Certainly, it was a prison like no other. It had no name. It was featured on no maps. Very few people even knew it existed. The staff who worked there—from the governor to the guards to the cleaners and the cook—had been told that if they ever breathed a word about what they did, they would end up in a cell themselves. The facility had been built at a cost of several million dollars and cost millions more to run, and yet—and this was the most remarkable thing of all—it housed just seven prisoners, each one in his own way so dangerous that there was little chance they would ever be released.

This was the problem. There has been no capital punishment in the United Kingdom since 1963, so what was the government to do with its worst enemies, the men and women who had sworn to bring about its destruction by any means? Of course, there were high-security prisons such as Belmarsh in the east of London or a psychiatric hospital such as Broadmoor in Berkshire—but even these weren't considered secure enough for the handful of special cases that had to be kept in almost total isolation. These were people who couldn't be allowed to tell their stories. They couldn't be killed. So they had to be put somewhere where they might be forgotten.

And so the compound had been constructed. Not in Britain. That was felt to be too close to home. Northern Ireland had been considered. There were still prisons there from the old days that could have been adapted. But instead the overseas territory of Gibraltar had finally been chosen, jutting out of the southern end of Spain. There were plenty of good reasons for this. First of all, it was still British soil. Surrounded by sea on three sides and with a well-patrolled border on the fourth, it was virtually a prison in itself. It was very quiet. Apart from the Spanish occasionally demanding that the land be given back, most people would have been hard-pressed to point to it on a map. And best of all, it was a base for both the British Armed Forces and the Royal Navy. There were already military buildings all over the peninsula. Who would notice one more?

The prison was high up on the Rock and overlooked the Bay of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean—or would have if the walls, six yards high and one yard thick, hadn't gotten in the way. Electrified razor wire ran inside the walls so that even if a prisoner managed to equip himself with a ladder, perhaps constructed secretly in the prison workshop, he wouldn't be able to place it anywhere close. The position of the fence had been chosen with care. It couldn't be seen from outside and there were no watch-towers, no armed guards on patrol. In other words, nothing gave away the true nature of the complex. Nobody lived nearby and passing residents and tourists believed

that it was a naval communications center dealing with satellite and Internet traffic.

Most of the security was invisible. There were almost a hundred closed-circuit TV cameras and hidden microphones so that prisoners were observed and listened to from the moment they woke up . . . and even while they were asleep. Movement sensors and thermal imaging cameras provided data twenty-four hours a day so that the guards could tell instantly where everyone was at any time. The dozen cells (five unoccupied) were built on solid rock so tunneling was out of the question, but more sensor wires crisscrossed the floor underneath anyway. No visitors were allowed. No letters were ever sent or received. There was just one entrance and exit: a holding area with an electronic gate at each end. Any vehicle entering or leaving the prison was required to drive onto a reinforced glass plate so that it could be examined and searched from all sides before it was allowed to continue.

And yet, surprisingly, the prison was a very comfortable place. It was as if the British government had wanted to convince the inmates that it wasn't completely inhumane. The various buildings scattered inside the walls were low-rise, made of wood and brick. Apart from the bars on the windows in the accommodation block, the complex slightly resembled a vacation village, an impression heightened by the flower beds, olive and cypress trees, and the sprinkler system dotted around the dusty, winding paths. The warden's villa was almost absurdly pretty. He

was a tough ex-army man, living there with his Spanish wife. But his home could have come out of Disneyland.

Each prisoner had his own cell with a bed, a work area, a TV, and a separate shower and toilet. There was a library, a well-equipped gym, a wood and metal workshop, and a dining room. The other buildings included an administration and residential block for the guards, a central control room, and a punishment block. This was a narrow corridor with three rooms built underground. The rooms were soundproofed with no windows, but they had seldom been used. There was no reason to cause any trouble. And as escape was impossible, nobody had ever tried.

Seven prisoners.

Two of them were terrorists, not the people who had carried the bombs but the ones who had decided where they should be placed. They had been captured while planning a nuclear strike on London, and they had been tried in secret and then brought to Gibraltar. Nobody was ever to know how nearly they had succeeded. Two of them were secret agents, spies working for foreign powers. They had managed to get deep inside the intelligence services before they were unmasked, and again, in their case, it was what they knew as much as what they were that made them so dangerous. One man—the oldest in the prison—claimed that he had been a weapons inspector in Iraq and was innocent of any crime. Nobody believed him. The sixth man was a freelance assassin. There

were very few pages in his file. He had never revealed his name, his nationality, his age, or the number of people he had killed.

But it was the seventh prisoner, the fifteen-year-old boy standing in front of the governor's villa, who was without doubt the most remarkable. In fact, he was almost unique; not born but created, given a face that wasn't his own, taught how to kill—and quite, quite insane.

His name was Julius Grief and he had been one of the sixteen clones created in a South African laboratory by his natural father, Dr. Hugo Grief. A clone is an exact copy of a human being, manufactured by taking a single cell and cultivating it inside an egg. Julius had not only never met his mother, he didn't really have one. Until he had been born, cloning had been restricted to laboratory animals. The most famous had been Dolly the sheep. But using technology that he had developed first at the University of Johannesburg and later as minister of science, Grief had cloned the first human beings: sixteen replicas of himself.

They had all grown up together in the Point Blanc Academy, a castle high up in the French Alps, near Grenoble. Dr. Grief had been planning to take over the richest and most powerful families on the planet by kidnapping their teenaged sons and replacing them with his own brood. One by one, the boys had been given painful—and permanent—plastic surgery, making them identical to their targets. None of them had complained.

This was the purpose of their entire life. This was what they had been created for. They had never had proper identities of their own. Even their names had been chosen deliberately. Each one of them had been named after a great world leader. Julius's name had come from Julius Caesar, the Roman emperor. And there had been other boys named Napoleon, Ghengis, Mao Tse, and even (the sixteenth) Adolf.

As things had turned out, Julius had been the last of the boys to be given a new identity. He was going to be Alex Friend, the son of Sir David Friend, a man who had made a fortune from supermarkets and art galleries. He was going to live in a huge house in Yorkshire, in the north of England. He would go riding and shooting with aristocratic friends. It was going to be amazing. And one day, after he had murdered Sir David and his family, it would all belong to him.

And so he had undergone the surgery. He had begun to learn his new role—how to talk like Alex Friend, how to walk like him, how to be him. And then, at the last minute, he had discovered the terrible truth. The boy he was watching day and night, the one he was modeling himself on, was not Alex Friend at all. His real name was Alex Rider and he was, incredibly, a spy working for British intelligence! Julius Grief had been given the wrong face! The face of Alex Rider!

Worse was to follow. Alex had escaped from Point Blanc, only to return at the head of an armed force. The

school had been destroyed. Dr. Grief had been killed. Julius had managed to escape and had tracked Alex down to his school in Chelsea, but somehow, even though he'd had surprise on his side and a loaded gun in his hand, Rider had managed to get the better of him. Julius remembered the fight on the roof of the chemistry block. The fire. Plunging down into the inferno. He could still feel the burns that started at his neck and crisscrossed his body all the way to his thighs. He'd spent two months in the hospital and the pain would be with him for the rest of his life. He was reminded of it every time he caught sight of his reflection.

He still had Alex's face.

It drove him mad. When he brushed his teeth in the morning, there it would be, in the mirror, smiling back at him. If he passed a window at night, the ghost of his enemy would glide by beside him. After a heavy rainfall, Alex Rider would look up at him from the puddles. There were times when he wanted to tear his face off with his own nails . . . In his early days at the prison he had tried to do exactly that, leaving deep scratches down his forehead and cheeks. That was when they had decided he needed psychiatric help. He was on his way to his next appointment now.

Julius Grief reached out and rang the bell at the side of the warden's front door. He was expected, of course, but it was against regulations to go in without ringing. The bell sounded both inside the building and in the

control room at the front gate. A TV camera had already picked him out and one of the guards was checking that he was meant to be there. Yes. An eleven o'clock appointment. He was exactly on time.

The front door opened and a short gray-haired woman looked out. As always, she was wearing dark colors with a white shirt buttoned up to her neck and very little jewelry. She could have been the headmistress of a primary school, perhaps in some remote English village. She was in her mid-forties with a pinched face and a slightly turned-up nose. Her name was Rosemary Flint and she was a child psychiatrist. She had been meeting Julius twice a week for the past six months, talking to him in the living room of the warden's house rather than in the library or in his cell because she hoped the homey atmosphere might help.

"Good morning, Julius," she said. She had one of those annoying voices that were always sweet and reasonable. Somehow you knew that she would never lose her temper.

"Good morning, Dr. Flint," Julius replied.

"How are you today?"

"I'm very well, thank you."

"Come in."

They had spoken almost exactly the same words fifty times and Dr. Flint noted that not once had the boy's expression ever changed. He was coldly polite. His eyes were empty. She had never told Julius this, but part of her

job was to decide if there was any chance that he could one day be released and returned to society. After all, it wasn't entirely his fault that he was what he was. That was how he had been made. Someone in British intelligence hoped that he could be turned around and that one day he might lead a normal life. But as far as Dr. Flint was concerned, that day was still a very long way off.

She led him into the living room and gestured toward a large, comfortable sofa covered with a fabric showing a pattern of flowers. There was no need for the gesture. Julius sat in the same place every time. The warden's wife liked flowers. The room had flowery wallpaper too, and there was a vase of roses, cut from the garden, on a low, dark wood table. The curtains were thick and kept out much of the sunlight even when they were open. An antique mirror had once hung on one of the walls, but Julius had smashed it in the middle of his third session. The warden hadn't been pleased, but Dr. Flint had insisted that there be no punishment. In her view, the boy wasn't responsible for his actions. She thought of him, at least in part, as a victim. A painting—a view of Cadiz—now hung in the mirror's place.

"Would you like some orange juice, Julius?" Dr. Flint asked.

"No, thank you," Julius said. He never drank or ate anything during these sessions. Dr. Flint had tried cookies, chocolates, Coke, and cream cakes—all without success. She knew exactly what was going on in his mind. To

have taken anything would have been to give her power over him. She might set the rules, but he was playing his own game. One day, she hoped, he might accept a Jaffa Cake. Then, at last, she would know that the healing process had begun.

“So how has your week been?”

“I’ve had a very good week, thank you.”

“Are you reading anything from the prison library?”

“I’ve just started *War Horse*.”

“That’s excellent, Julius. You should try to read as much as you can.” She smiled. “What’s it about?”

“It’s about some stupid horses that get killed in the war.”

“Aren’t you enjoying it?”

“No. Not much.”

Dr. Flint sighed. The boy was lying. She knew every book that he had borrowed and every book that he had read. He was the only teenager in the prison and there weren’t a great many things he could do with his time. He devoured books. But when he was with her, he pretended otherwise.

“Have you thought more about what we spoke about last time?” she asked.

“We discussed a lot of things, Dr. Flint.”

“We were talking about anger management.”

“I’m not angry.”

“I think you are.”

Julius didn’t answer, but he could feel something

burning white-hot inside him. It wasn't anger. How could this stupid woman describe it like that? It was like molten lava flowing through his intestines. It was like acid. He looked down deliberately, knowing that he would be unable to keep the emotion out of his eyes. Dr. Flint would see it and she would write it down in that notebook of hers. She wrote everything down as if she could even begin to understand him. It was lucky that she couldn't see into his imagination. Julius dreamed of killing Alex Rider. Slowly. Painfully. He should have done it on the school roof a year ago. He had come so close.

And he might yet get another chance. For a brief second, Julius thought about the note he had found the night before. It had been waiting for him, hidden in his room . . . incredibly, impossibly. He had read it so many times that he knew every word by heart—but he quickly forced it out of his mind. The woman was still examining him. He didn't dare give anything away.

"I thought we might try some word association today," Dr. Flint said.

"Whatever you say, Dr. Flint." It was her favorite game. She said one word. He had to say another, instantly, without any thought. It was supposed to demonstrate what was going on in his mind.

"Right." She looked around her. "I'm going to start with something very ordinary. You know what to do."

There was a pause. Then she began.

"Dog."

“Bone.”

“Kitchen.”

“Knife.”

“Handle.”

“Blade.”

“Grass.”

“Dead body.”

Dr. Flint stopped. “I don’t understand the association,” she said. “When you said ‘blade,’ I said ‘grass’ because I was thinking of a blade of grass.”

“And when you said ‘grass,’ I thought of burying someone underneath it.”

“Who do you want to bury, Julius?”

Julius didn’t answer. They both knew whom he had in mind.

“Let’s try again,” Dr. Flint said. For the first time in her career, she was beginning to wonder if there was any point in this. She had been working with this child for months and she had made no progress at all. She touched her lip. “Mouth.”

“Throat.”

“Drink.”

“Poison.”

“Bottle.”

“Message.”

“Letter.”

“Bed.”

She stopped a second time. “That was a little better,”

she said. "You were thinking of a message in a bottle, I suppose. But why did you say 'bed'?"

Julius was cursing himself. He couldn't get the message out of his head. He had found it under his pillow when he went to bed. Someone must have placed it there during the day. And now he had almost let it slip out of his mouth, throwing out words without thinking.

"Actually, I've got a slight headache. Do you mind if we don't play this anymore?" he asked.

"Of course, Julius. Do you want to have a rest?"

"No, Dr. Flint." Only a few minutes of the session had passed. They still had a whole hour together. Julius wondered if he would be able to get through it without screaming at her or even trying to break her neck. He had thrown himself at her once, early on in his therapy, and after he'd been dragged off, they'd put him in the punishment block for a week. That couldn't happen now. The message. The secret friends. They wouldn't keep him waiting long. He just had to hold everything together until the right time.

"All right. Why don't we draw some pictures together? I'd like you to draw some imaginary place, and then you can take me through it and tell me what you can see."

Julius had an imaginary place. It was a forest with Alex Rider hanging from every tree. A whole world of Alex Riders, each one of them suffering in a different way.

"Can I draw an amusement park?" he asked.

"Of course, Julius."

Even as he picked up the child's crayon that had been supplied for him, he thought about the moment he had lifted the pillow and seen the single folded sheet of paper beneath. He had known at once that it was something special. Nobody ever came into his room when he wasn't there. The other prisoners weren't allowed. The guards and the cleaners made a point of asking his permission.

He had unfolded it and read:

WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE ARE PREPARING TO
HELP YOU ESCAPE FROM THIS PLACE. GO TO
THE LIBRARY TOMORROW AT TWELVE O'CLOCK
AND YOU WILL FIND FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

The words had been neatly typed. Instead of a signature there was a little emblem printed in silver at the bottom of the page.

A scorpion.

Julius had read the note a dozen times, then crumpled it into a ball and swallowed it with a cup of water he had drawn from the tap. After that he had gone to bed—but he hadn't slept.

WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS.

Who? He had no friends. Could it be some of his brothers? Julius had never found out what had happened to them after the Point Blanc Academy had been shut down but had assumed that they were, like him, prisoners. Perhaps he had been contacted by people who had

known his father. They might be from the old South Africa . . .

TOMORROW AT TWELVE O'CLOCK . . .

Tomorrow was now today. It was already ten past eleven. Just fifty minutes to go. Julius Grief forced the image of Alex Rider (with a kitchen knife in his chest, his bones exposed, lying in the grass, under the grass) out of his mind and began to draw a merry-go-round. Dr. Flint watched him and of course she didn't know. Nobody knew.

This was the day he was going to escape.



OVER THE EDGE

THE LIBRARY WAS THE MOST modern building in the prison, and although it was unusually small and compact, it could have been lifted out of almost any provincial town in England. It was low-rise with red bricks and sliding glass doors and contained about three hundred books—half in English, half in Spanish—for the guards and their families used it too. There was a desk where books had to be signed in and out, a newspaper and magazine section (although all the publications were carefully censored), then the books themselves, divided into the usual classifications. The crime and horror sections were the most popular with the prisoners. New books appeared occasionally, mainly sent in by charities. When Julius Grief had arrived, the warden had personally set up a children's section, purchasing the first books—a complete collection of Roald Dahl—with his own money.

Julius Grief walked over as soon as his session with Dr. Flint was over, crossing the open space where some of the other prisoners were enjoying the sun, sitting on rickety chairs between the trees. The two terrorists were playing Scrabble. As Julius walked past, one of them noticed him and nodded vaguely in his direction. He had just made the word JIHAD with the *J* on a triple letter, scoring thirty-three

points. The assassin was nearby, reading a celebrity magazine, circling some of the heads with a black felt-tip pen. The other prisoners didn't really like having a teenager among them. It offended their sense of dignity.

Julius had to force himself not to hurry. He knew that his every movement was being watched and that any strange behavior, any indication that he was planning something would be reported immediately. He actually hesitated before he went into the library, as if he wasn't sure whether he needed a book or not. Then he made up his mind and passed through the glass doors.

"*Buenos días, Julius.*" The librarian was a Spaniard who also worked in the prison accounts office. His name was Carlos and he was plump and good-natured, dressed in the same uniform as the guards, an olive green shirt and dark trousers. "You are coming to the talk tonight?"

"I'm looking forward to it," Julius said.

There were occasional talks in the library, given by the prisoners or by the guards. Two weeks ago, one of the secret agents had given an hour's lecture on the Cold War. Tonight, the chef was demonstrating his mother's recipe for paella.

"What brings you here today?" Carlos asked.

"I've come to borrow a book."

Carlos glanced at his computer screen. "But you already have three books in your cell."

"I know. But I've finished two of them. And I'm not enjoying the third . . ."

Julius walked toward the bookshelves, feeling the librarian's eyes boring into his back. What exactly was he looking for? The note had told him to come here . . . he would find further instructions. But apart from Carlos, there was no one else in the building. Would there be a second letter hidden somewhere here—and if so, how was he meant to find it? He decided to head for the children's section. After all, that was where “they” would have expected him to go.

He stopped in front of the shelves. The Dahl collection stretched from one side to the other. Julius had never read any of it, although he had once come upon one of the terrorists with *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*. As far as he could see, nothing had changed since his last visit. He could even make out the gaps where he had pulled out his own choice of books.

And then he saw it. One new book, lying flat on its side. A fat, dusty-looking hardback called *Wildlife in Gibraltar: Volume 2—Birds and Insects*. It shouldn't have been here. It should have been on the other side of the room, in Natural History. But that wasn't what had caught his eye. It was the cover. There was a picture of an insect that seemed to be gazing at him with its tiny eyes. It couldn't just be a coincidence.

It was a scorpion—the same creature that had appeared on his note.

He glanced around. Carlos was sitting, tapping at his keyboard. The librarian seemed to have forgotten him.

But there were still cameras mounted in all four corners of the room. They would be watching him from the control room beside the gate. Julius put on a performance for their benefit. He took out one book, then another—as if considering which one to read—then finally lifted the wildlife volume and carried it over to a table.

He had chosen the position carefully. The table was right next to a shelf, which screened it from the cameras. Carlos could still see him. But he was fairly certain that the book was out of sight. Very carefully, he opened it. And gasped. How could this have happened? Nobody knew about the prison. Nobody could possibly infiltrate it. And yet there it was in front of him. The pages of the book had been cut out to provide a hiding place for a gun, a Mauser C96 automatic pistol with the barrel shortened to allow it to fit. Julius ran a finger over the cold metal. He had been taught to shoot when he was six years old and had killed for the first time when he was nine. But it had been a long time since he had held a gun in his own hands, and he had thought he would never have one again. For just one moment he felt an urge to pick it up, to turn around and shoot Carlos in the head. But that was crazy. He had to be careful, do this one step at a time.

There was a second note folded into the book. It was much longer and more detailed than the message he had received the night before. Julius read it very carefully. Whoever was helping him, these were serious people. He knew he couldn't make a mistake. Finally, when he was

ready, he closed the book and got up. It was half past twelve, exactly the right time. He knew what he had to do.

The subject has made no progress at all since his arrival in Gibraltar. It is clear that Julius Grief has a pathological hatred for Alex Rider that is deep-rooted and permanent. And yet, at the same time, surgery has made him identical to the object of his hate. It must surely follow that subconsciously, some of that hatred must be directed against himself. In my view, there is a very real danger that this psychological turmoil could drive Grief over the edge and that he could plunge into depression, suicide, or total nervous breakdown. Indeed, it is surprising that it hasn't happened yet.

Dr. Flint looked at what she had just written and felt a deep sense of gloom. She had been working with damaged children for her entire professional life, but she had never met anyone like Julius Grief. On the one hand, she wanted to feel sorry for him. He wasn't responsible for what he had become. He had been manipulated from the moment he was born—in fact, even his birth had been manipulated. He was a freak, created for one purpose only: to help his father take over the world. She had read the file on Hugo Grief and it had made her shudder. All sixteen boys had been drip-fed a diet of hatred and insanity, and all of them (apart from two who had died) had ended up in institutions like this, locked up for the rest of their lives. It wasn't their fault.

And yet no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't

avoid the fact that she had a deep dislike for Julius. She knew it was unprofessional, but at the same time it was almost instinctive. He was a horrible person. And she wasn't fooled by him either. Although he went along with her methods—the discussions, the word association, the different psychological tests—she knew he was toying with her. And he was keeping something back. Even this morning she had been aware of it. He had tried to hide what he was thinking in his expressionless face and his flat, formal answers. But there had been moments when she sensed it, flickering in the corner of her eye like a moth in candlelight. There was something he wasn't telling her. She wondered if she should mention it to the warden but decided against it. She was the boy's therapist. She had to respect his confidentiality. She went back to her notes.

I recommend that Julius be put back on medication with immediate effect. Although I do not like drugging young people, I feel that in his case—

The doorbell rang. That was surprising. The warden never came back before two o'clock, and his wife was out for lunch. Dr. Flint went over to the small television screen in the hallway and saw a black-and-white image of Julius standing outside, holding a bunch of flowers that he must have picked himself in the prison garden. She was tempted not to open the door. He shouldn't be here. It was against regulations. She remembered how he had

tried to attack her in one of her first sessions with him. And then there had been the time when he had gone berserk and smashed the mirror. She should tell him to go away.

But then she reconsidered. All that had been a long time ago, and maybe he really was trying to make amends for his behavior that morning. Maybe he had come to tell her what was on his mind. The flowers were a sweet touch. And anyway, there were dozens of cameras that would be trained on him even now. There was no danger. She opened the door.

“What is it, Julius?” she asked.

“It’s a bit difficult to explain, Dr. Flint.”

“Do you want to come back inside?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I’d like you to come with me.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“We’re leaving here—together.”

He dropped the flowers and there it was, in his hand, pointing at her. Dr. Flint stared in shock. Julius Grief was holding a gun, his finger curled around the trigger, a glazed look in his eyes. It was like something out of a nightmare. First, it made no sense at all. How could he possibly have gotten a gun? And yet at the same time there was something horribly inevitable about it. Julius was managing to contain his excitement. He was in total control. Dr. Flint knew that if she didn’t do exactly what he said, he would shoot her without a second thought.

He stepped forward and suddenly the gun was at her

throat and his face was close to hers and she could feel the madness as if she had been slapped with it. He was as tall as her and a great deal stronger. He was armed. For the first time since she had known him, his face had cracked into something resembling a smile. Suddenly he was no longer fifteen and the good looks that the plastic surgeon had given him were twisted out of shape. He could have been fifteen or he could have been fifty. Evil has no age. Dr. Flint was terrified. Had she really spent the last six months, twice a week, on her own with this monster?

“I’m going to walk out of here,” Julius said, and his voice was soft even if it was on the edge of hysteria. “Walk, walk, walk, walk. And you’re going to help me.”

“They’ll never let you through the gate.”

Julius pressed the gun into the side of her neck, the sawed-off muzzle pointing upward. “Then they’ll be scraping your brains off the fence,” he told her. “Shall we go, Dr. Flint? I think we should.”

They walked together like two lovers performing some strange sort of dance. Dr. Flint was looking straight ahead, her head tilted, her eyes still staring. Julius was enjoying himself. The feel of the gun in his hand was giving him strength. He loved the way the hard steel pressed into the woman’s flesh. For months he had endured her stupid questions, her endless games. Now, at last, he was the one in command.

Despite all the cameras, Julius Grief and Dr. Flint had

almost reached the first gate, the entrance to the holding area, before anyone realized that something was wrong. Perhaps they thought it was some sort of exercise, part of the therapy, but then at last someone saw the gun and realized what was actually going on. At once, long-rehearsed emergency procedures sprang into life. A dozen sirens went off, their combined sound echoing all over the peninsula. Guards burst out of doorways, their weapons ready. The other prisoners were rushed, at gunpoint, back into their cells. An automated phone message had been sent instantly to the Devil's Tower Camp, home of the Royal Gibraltar Regiment close to the airport, calling for immediate backup, and before Julius had even had a chance to make his demands, half a dozen Land Rovers were speeding out of the garrison and beginning the long climb uphill.

For a moment, everything froze. It was as if the entire compound had become a photograph of itself. Julius Grief was still holding on to Dr. Flint, one hand on her shoulder, the other—with the gun—pressing against her neck. He was surrounded by rifles and automatic machine guns. They were aiming at him from every direction. The sun was beating down, glinting off the razor-wire fence. Somewhere outside the prison, there was a brief chatter of laughter as one of the island's famous apes swung itself off the branch of a tree and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Then the warden appeared. He was a short, muscular

man with silver hair cut short, dressed in army fatigues. He had been in the control room when the alarm was sounded. He stopped in the holding area on the other side of the gate.

“Grief!” he barked. He had been in the Royal Navy for twenty years. He had the sort of voice that was used to being obeyed. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Open the gate or I’ll put a bullet in her.” Julius was loving this. He could feel the world spinning around him. “I’ll kill her. I promise.”

“Where did you get the gun?”

A stupid question. Julius wasn’t going to answer it. “Five seconds,” he called out.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“Four . . .”

The warden had to make a decision. He had no doubt at all that Grief would use the gun. He could see that Rosemary Flint was terrified. The guards were waiting for his command, but he couldn’t let them fire, not unless they wanted to kill the woman too. How could the boy have possibly gotten hold of the weapon? Was it even a real one? He couldn’t take the risk of finding out. Dr. Flint was a civilian. Her safety came first.

“Three seconds, warden.”

Right now, the boy had the upper hand. But that would change on the other side of the prison gates. Backup would already be on its way and Julius Grief hadn’t actually worked it out properly. He had nowhere to go. He

was high above the main city and harbor with narrow lanes and hairpin bends all the way down. He wouldn't be able to keep Flint close to him all the time, and even if he made it to the bottom, there was no way he could leave the peninsula. Nobody was going to let him get on a plane or a ship. The Spanish border authorities would already have been alerted. Everything was on the warden's side. Once Grief was out, it would be easy to pick him off.

"Open the gate!" Julius shouted. His face was deathly pale. His arm and the hand with the gun were rigid. Even if someone did shoot him, he would still manage to kill Dr. Flint before he died.

"Do what he says!" the warden called out.

For another second nothing happened, as if the guards couldn't believe what they had just heard. Then there was a click and the heavy gate began to roll aside. Julius grabbed hold of Dr. Flint's collar and began to drag her forward, the two of them moving side by side. The guns followed them into the holding area.

The inner gate slid shut and they were trapped inside a pen with fences on three sides of them, the control room on the fourth. The warden had retreated, as if trying to get as far away from them as possible. A young guard stared at them from behind a plate glass window. Nothing like this had ever happened at the prison before.

"Julius," Dr. Flint rasped. It was hard for her to talk with the gun pressed against her throat. "Don't do this. It's not going to work."

“I would very much enjoy pulling this trigger,” Julius replied. “In fact, I’d love it. So if I were you, I’d shut up, Dr. Flint. Don’t give me the excuse.”

The second gate opened, and for the first time in twelve long months, Julius was able to see the little olive groves, the scattered boulders, and the wild grass on the other side of the walls. In the distance he glimpsed the Mediterranean, a twisting ribbon of blue.

“Off we go!”

He forced Dr. Flint forward. This was the critical moment. He knew that as soon as he had left the prison, he would have to get rid of her. She would only slow him down. But that would be when he was most exposed. The guards wouldn’t hesitate to shoot. Julius was putting all his trust in the people who had sent him his instructions—and he still had no idea who they were. If they had tricked him, if they had failed to deliver, he would be killed. But in a way he didn’t care. Better this one minute of freedom than a life behind bars.

The two of them had passed through the outer gate and now the prison was behind them. Julius Grief had been brought here in a blacked-out van, so he had never seen the view. A narrow track ran downhill past some small concrete buildings like pillboxes from the last war. The ground was dusty and covered in pine needles. He could smell pine and eucalyptus in the air. There was nobody in sight, but the letter in the book had warned him that he would have only five minutes before the Royal

Gibraltar Regiment Land Rovers reached him. He had to move fast.

He swung his hand, cracking the Mauser across Dr. Flint's head. The woman cried out and fell to her knees, blood pouring down the side of her face. Julius twisted around and fired three shots at the prison gates, the bullets ricocheting off the brickwork. He hadn't hurt anyone, but it would give them something to think about. Certainly nobody would choose to come running out in the next few seconds, and he needed all the time he could get.

He began to run down the hill. He had kept himself fit while he was in prison, not because he had anywhere to go but because that was how he had been brought up. His father, Hugo Grief, had insisted on six hours of exercise a day, starting with a two-mile run through the snow. They had learned martial arts. They knew how to kill.

And he had taught them how to drive.

The car was waiting exactly where the letter had said it would be, parked just off the lane behind a cluster of the date palm trees that were dotted all over Gibraltar. It was a small SUV, a Suzuki Jimny, cheap and boxlike and covered in dust. One fender was crumpled. The driver's mirror was cracked. To look at, it could have been abandoned, but the door was unlocked and the keys were in the ignition. Julius scrambled inside. At the same time, he heard a car rush past on the lane, heading downhill from the prison. Fortunately, the driver hadn't seen him. Some-

body shouted. The guards were spreading out on foot as well. It wouldn't take them long to find him. He slammed the door and turned the key.

The 1.3 cylinder engine rattled noisily to life. The guards wouldn't expect him to have a car, but they must have heard the sound and would know—if they hadn't already guessed—that every aspect of this escape had been planned, with help from outside. Julius jammed the gear into reverse, then shot out onto the lane, the wheels spinning and sending out clouds of dust. The Suzuki was cramped and handled badly. It would struggle to get around the curves. Still, it was better than walking.

A shot rang out, slamming into the bodywork just above the rear tire. One of the guards had seen him. Julius shoved the gearshift into first and accelerated. The Suzuki leapt forward even as the guard fired again, his second shot splintering the branch of a nearby tree. Julius was hunched over the wheel. There was another guard on the lane ahead of him. How had he gotten there so fast? As he brought his gun around, Julius floored the accelerator pedal. For a brief second the guard filled the front window. Then the car hit him and there was a sickening thud as he was thrown into the air, the gun spinning out of his hands.

Julius was ten yards down the road before the man hit the ground. There were two prison jeeps behind him. He could see them in his rearview mirror. They were faster than the Jimmy, getting closer by the second. If he hadn't

been driving downhill, they would already have caught him. Just ahead, the lane curved steeply to the right. He spun the wheel and suddenly he was on the very edge of the hillside with a sheer drop of a hundred yards. He saw the huge rocks and the sea far below. At the same time, he felt the tires slipping off the track, grit and loose pebbles spraying out. He fought with the steering wheel, forcing the Suzuki back under his control. By the time he had rounded the corner, he had put some distance between himself and the pursuing vehicles—but he had almost killed himself too.

The next corner was easier. It bent to the left so that this time the car was hugging the cliff face, away from the sea. Even so, Julius miscalculated and there was an explosion of glass and plastic as one of the mirrors disintegrated against a rocky outcrop. The jeeps were catching up again too, and looking ahead, he could see the fleet of Land Rovers belonging to the Royal Gibraltar Regiment climbing toward him.

There was no way down. There was no way back. The next hairpin bend and a sheer drop to certain death were straight ahead.

Julius wrenched the wheel to the right. The driver of the nearest jeep saw the Suzuki leave the road, weaving across a patch of scrubland toward a dilapidated barn. The boy was out of control. He tried to steer the car back onto the track but instead smashed straight into the barn door, disappearing in a blast of shattering wood. For the

next few seconds, the car was out of sight, inside the barn, but then it reappeared, breaking through the other side, the hood crumpled, the front window now a spider's web of cracks. Julius Grief could only be glimpsed, staring out with a rictus smile, his light brown hair sweeping down over his eyes, his hands glued to the steering wheel.

There was nowhere to go. The cars from the barracks had almost arrived and were taking up positions lower down the hill, blocking the way. With the rocks on one side and the drop on the other, there was no way to get past.

Julius didn't even try. Perhaps he couldn't see. Perhaps he had been concussed when he hit the barn door. He didn't even attempt to steer the car, tearing dead straight across the scrubland, rejoining the track, then continuing over it. As the horrified prison drivers skidded to a halt, the Suzuki reached the other side of the track, smashed through a barbed-wire fence, and launched itself into the void. Briefly it hung in the air. Then it plunged down, following the sheer edge of the Rock in a long, terrible descent toward the sea. About halfway down it hit a boulder. There was a single explosion as it burst into flames, somersaulted, then continued on its way. It was upside down when it hit the water. For a moment it rested there, the flames licking upward as if trying to set the sea alight. Then it sank. A few pieces of broken metal rolled down the hillside. Apart from that, there was nothing left.

The nearest Land Rover came to a halt and the driver got out. Gradually, more guards appeared, hurrying across the grass to peer over the edge, beside the broken fence. Below them and to one side, the city of Gibraltar lay spread out, the high-rises facing the sea. The Mediterranean itself was a brilliant blue, the sun throwing a million shimmering reflections across the surface.

“Did you see that?” someone asked.

“Poor bastard!”

“You think he did it on purpose? He didn’t even try to get back on the road.”

“He could still be alive.”

“Forget it. Nobody could have survived that. He’ll have drowned . . . if he didn’t burn to death first.”

“Poor sod. And he was only fifteen.”

There would have to be an inquiry, of course. The most critical question would be—how had the gun been smuggled into the prison? One of the guards must have been bribed . . . but which one? And which organization had been behind the attempted escape? How had they even known about the existence of the prison in the first place? An ambulance was already on its way to take Dr. Flint to St. Bernard’s Hospital in the middle of Gibraltar city. As the last person to see Julius Grief alive, she might be able to fill in a few details. The warden would have to fly to London, to report at the highest level. There would be severe reprimands all around and an inevitable tightening of security.

There were now six prisoners instead of seven. Julius Grief was dead and although frogmen would be sent to the seabed, there was very little chance that much or any of his remains would be discovered in the wreckage of the car. Well, he wouldn't be missed. He was only a kid, but he was a mad kid. None of the other prisoners had liked him. Perhaps it was better this way.

And nobody knew the truth.

The trick had been played inside the old barn, during the few seconds when Julius Grief had been out of sight. As he had been instructed, he had driven into the building, smashing through a door that had been specially weakened for just this purpose. A whole team of Scorpia agents—six of them—had been waiting for him inside the barn, and as he skidded to a halt, a second, identical Suzuki Jimny had burst out the other side. But this one had no driver. It was radio controlled with a dummy Julius strapped to the wheel, almost invisible behind all the cracks. It didn't have to travel very far. In fact, it had been a simple task to guide it across the open patch of land, through the fence, and over the edge.

And while the guards were watching the fall and the explosion, the Scorpia team had got to work. The original Suzuki had been hastily covered with a tarpaulin and then with straw. Julius had been led to a pit constructed in the floor with a trapdoor sliding across. There was enough room for him and all the agents to bundle in together, and

within seconds they had all disappeared. If anyone from the prison had thought to look inside the barn after the crash, they would have found it to be quite empty and abandoned with a few bits of old machinery, a haystack, and some moldy bags of animal feed.

But nobody did. Everything had happened exactly as Scorpia had intended. As far as the world was concerned, Julius Grief was dead. And nobody was watching that night as a fishing boat with a single smiling passenger slipped out of Gibraltar harbor beneath a full moon and a starry sky and began its journey south.



SECRETS AND LIES

THE REPORT WAS MARKED TOP SECRET with the two words stamped on the cover in red ink, but in fact there was no need for them. Only three copies had been printed, one for Alan Blunt, the head of MI6 Special Operations, one for his deputy, Mrs. Jones, and one for the chief science officer, and since almost everything they did was secret in one way or another anyway, they hardly needed to be told. Sometimes Blunt wondered how many tens of thousands of documents had passed across the polished surface of his desk, here on the sixteenth floor of the building that called itself the Royal and General Bank on Liverpool Street in London. Each one of them had told its own dirty little story. Some of them had led nowhere, while others had demanded instant action. An operation might be set up on the other side of the world, an agent sent out to run it. How many people had died on the turn of a page?

But there wouldn't be many more files coming his way. Alan Blunt sat back in his chair and looked around him, his mind still sifting through the details of what he had just read. He had occupied this office for seventeen years and could have described it with his eyes closed—right down to the last paper clip. It was simply furnished

with an antique desk and a scattering of chairs on a neutral carpet, two paintings on the walls—landscapes that were barely worth examining—and a shelf full of reference books that had never been opened. Rooms tell a lot about the people who occupy them. Blunt had made sure that this room said nothing at all.

And soon he would be leaving it. The new prime minister had decided that it was time to make changes, and the entire department was being reorganized. Blunt still didn't know who would be taking his place, but he rather suspected it might be Mrs. Jones. She hadn't said anything to him, of course, nor would he have expected her to. He very much hoped that she would be promoted. She had been recruited straight from Cambridge University, bringing with her a first-class degree in political science. There had been tragedies in her life—the loss of her husband and two sons—but she had risen above them. She had a brilliant mind. Blunt wondered if the prime minister would be smart enough to recognize her talents. He had thought of sending a memo to 10 Downing Street but had decided against it. They could make the decision for themselves.

What did the future hold for him? Blunt was fifty-eight years old, not quite retirement age. He would certainly be given a knighthood in the New Year's Honors, his name appearing between celebrities and civil servants. "For services to government and inland security." It would be something nice and bland like that. He might be

offered the directorship of a bank, a real one this time. He had once considered writing a book, but there was no real point. He had signed the Official Secrets Act, and if you took the secrets out of his life, there would be nothing left.

Briefly, he found himself examining the empty chairs opposite him. Blunt was not an emotional man, but he couldn't stop himself from remembering some of the men and women who had sat there. He had given them their orders and they had gone, often not to return. Danvers, Wilson, Rigby, Mortimer, and Singh . . . who had done so well in Afghanistan until his cover had been blown. And John Rider. Blunt would never have dreamed of saying so, but he had always had a special regard for the agent who had finally been assassinated on the orders of Scorpia just as he was leaving for the south of France with his young wife. John Rider had been a much more effective agent than his younger brother, Ian.

And then, of course, there was Alex Rider, who had in many ways surpassed them both. Blunt half smiled to himself. He had known from the very start that there was something special about the fourteen-year-old, and he had refused to listen to the voices that had insisted it was mad to bring a schoolboy into the world of espionage. Alex had been the perfect weapon because he was so unexpected, and he had done something that very few other agents had achieved. He had been sent out on eight missions and he had survived.

In a way, though, Alex had been the cause of Blunt's undoing. When the prime minister had found out that MI6 was using not just a teenager but one who was under sixteen, he had hit the roof. It was against every rule in the book. The public would have been horrified if the facts had ever leaked out, and of course the prime minister would have shared some of the blame even though it had nothing to do with him. Blunt had no doubt that Alex was the reason he had been asked to step down. He had also been told in no uncertain terms that Alex was not to be sent out again, or to be replaced. So that was that. In a way, Blunt was glad. He had seen enough body bags. It would have been difficult to look at one that was half sized.

The file . . .

Very unusually, Blunt had let his mind wander. He forced himself to focus once again. Forty-eight hours ago, a body had been found floating in the River Thames, just to the east of Southwark Bridge. The body was that of a middle-aged man wearing a suit and tie, and he had been shot in the back of the neck. Identification had not been difficult because the man had only one eye and had once served in the Israeli army, which still held his medical records. His name was Levi Kroll and he was known to be an active member, indeed one of the founding partners, of Scorpia. As soon as that connection had been made, the red lights had begun to flash and the file had been passed here, to Special Operations.

It seemed almost incredible that such a senior member

of Scorpia would have been murdered and, even more so, that his body would have been allowed to be found. It raised all sorts of questions. What was Kroll doing in London to begin with? Was it in some way connected to the appearance of Zeljan Kurst, just a few months before, and the violence at the British Museum? There were no records of Kroll having entered the country, although that was hardly surprising, as he would have had at least a dozen different identities, each one with its own passport. Who had killed him? According to the reports, he had taken a .300 Winchester Short Magnum bullet in the back of the neck, possibly fired by a Belgian FN Special Police Rifle from a distance of around seventy yards. Could a rival organization have declared war on Scorpia? Blunt considered the possibility. There was no doubt that Scorpia's reputation had declined in the past twelve months. Another group could well have decided to steal its territory.

There were several clues mentioned in the report. Blunt had underlined them in red ink, putting a star beside them in the margin. To begin with, the MI6 investigators had suggested that Kroll might have been in Egypt. The shirt that he had been wearing when he died had been purchased at a shop in the Arkadia Mall, overlooking the Nile. It was made by Dalydress, an expensive Egyptian manufacturer, and it was part of their new spring collection, so it must have been bought recently. Of course, the shirt could have been a present, but they

had trawled through hundreds of hours of closed-circuit television footage from all four of London's airports, concentrating on flights that had come in from Egypt, and finally the work had paid off. A man with a beard and an eye patch had indeed come off a British Midlands flight from Cairo the day before Kroll had been washed up.

He had been carrying two items that gave the MI6 men plenty to play with. The first of these was a crocodile-skin wallet in his inner pocket, purchased from Cartier in Paris and fairly new. It contained several credit cards in the name of Goodman, which must have been the identity he had chosen for this visit to England. The cards had been checked for their credit history. Only one purchase had been made. "Goodman" had bought three magazines and a newspaper at Heathrow Airport. The newspaper was the *Times Educational Supplement*—normally read by teachers and academics. Blunt had drawn a line beside this and added a question mark.

The wallet also contained a magnetic key card such as might be used in any hotel in the world, but it was unmarked and, Blunt knew, very hard to trace. Kroll had been carrying \$350 in different currencies: English pounds, American dollars, and Egyptian pounds, another connection with Cairo. Finally, the wallet held the stub of a ticket to the Milan opera house dated from one month ago, a receipt for dinner at Harry's Bar in Venice, and a photograph of a ten-year-old boy with his arm around a Rottweiler dog. His son? It wasn't even known if Kroll was married.

But of even greater interest was the Apple iPhone that had been found in the same pocket as the wallet. Of course, the water had almost completely destroyed it, but even so, the MI6 technicians had managed to retrieve a few tiny scraps of information from its memory. These had been printed on a separate sheet for Blunt and he laid it out in front of him.

... progress ... the vicar
Shafik (43) ... payment
31st May—4th Ju
... target ...

Blunt examined the words, searching for any possible associations. Assuming this referred to a Scorpia operation, Kroll would have been unusually careless to enter anything into his mobile phone. But then of course he wouldn't have known he was about to die. The dates, three weeks from now, rang a faint bell—although were they referring to June or July? Shafik was an Arabic name; 43 might be his age. Was he the target mentioned in the last line? Or could he be an assassin? That would certainly explain the need for payment. And what of the vicar? The word sat at the top of the page, underlined. That would suggest some sort of operation involving religion, but frankly, church was the last place you would expect to find anyone from Scorpia.

It was a puzzle, but Blunt didn't need to waste any more mental energy trying to decipher it. Half a dozen

different departments within Special Operations would have been working on the note from the moment it had been found, and he had called a meeting for nine o'clock in the morning, expecting to hear results. As if on cue, there was a knock at the door and Mrs. Jones entered, followed by a younger woman, casually dressed, with fair hair and freckles. This was Samantha Redwing. She was only twenty-seven, but she had risen quickly through the ranks of MI6 to become chief science officer. Redwing had a photographic memory and the analytical skills of a world-class chess player. Surprisingly, she was also very normal, with a boyfriend who worked in advertising, an apartment in Notting Hill Gate, and a proper social life. Blunt thought she might well be unique.

The two women sat down. They were each carrying their copy of the Scorpia file. Blunt nodded at them. "Good morning. What progress do we have on this business with Levi Kroll?"

"We've made some headway." Mrs. Jones opened her file. She was dressed, as always, in dark colors, which with her jet-black hair and dark eyes made her look not just businesslike but almost as if she were on her way to a funeral. The next head of MI6? Blunt noticed a sheaf of pages stapled behind the original report. She had, of course, come prepared. "First of all, Kroll had been in the water for around ten hours when he was found, suggesting that he was shot around eleven o'clock at night. We've examined the tidal reports for the Thames, and if he was

going to end up being washed ashore at Southwark, then he would have had to have entered the water farther east, probably somewhere around Woolwich.”

That was close to City Airport. A question formed in Blunt’s mind, but he didn’t interrupt as his deputy considered.

“We’ve been focusing our efforts on the electronic key card and the information we were able to retrieve from his iPhone,” Mrs. Jones went on. “It’s a shame that all his telephone numbers were lost—and the phone itself won’t tell us very much. It’s the latest model, the iPhone 4, purchased in New York the day it came out.

“But we think we may have decoded the actual words. They don’t mean very much on their own, but you have to put them together with the other things that Kroll was carrying. The key to it all is the *Times Educational Supplement* that he bought at Heathrow. I have this week’s edition here.” She produced a copy and laid it on the desk. “What would a man like Kroll want with a paper like this? Was he interested in something that might involve a school? If we assume that *Ju* means June, not July, then the dates—the thirty-first of May to the fourth of June—just happen to coincide with the next half-term in many schools in the UK and around Europe. We know that Kroll had just come from Cairo. And Shafik—the name on the phone—could well be Egyptian.”

“So Scorpia might be interested in a school somewhere in Egypt.”

“That’s exactly the conclusion we arrived at and that’s how we’ve been directing our research.”

Mrs. Jones unwrapped a peppermint and slipped it into her mouth. Blunt waited for her to continue.

“There are twenty-eight men and women with the surname Shafik working in different schools around Egypt,” she said. “Eleven of them are in Cairo. To start with, we assumed that the figure—forty-three—referred to their age. That narrowed the field to three and only one in Cairo, a Mrs. Alifa Shafik, the headmistress at a primary school. But we checked her out and there’s nothing that could possibly make her of interest to an organization like Scorpia. The school is in a poor area of the city. We decided that trail went nowhere.”

Blunt nodded his agreement. He was quietly impressed. Mrs. Jones had moved quickly and there was no doubting the logic of what she had said. “Shafik is a fairly common name,” he muttered. “The link with the educational supplement is interesting and it may well be that a school is involved. But it could be in Alexandria or Port Said or even Luxor. Do we have anything more specific?”

“As a matter of fact we do.” Mrs. Jones flicked through the pages of the newspaper. “We read the *Times Educational Supplement* from cover to cover, looking for stories that related to Egypt, trying to make a connection. There were none—but in the back there was an advertisement for a new head of security at the Cairo International College of Arts and Education, which is in

Sheikh Fayed City in the outskirts of Cairo. That seemed like quite a coincidence, so we contacted the school. And we discovered something rather interesting. They need a new security chief because their last one was run over and killed as he was arriving for work. His name, as it happens, was Mohammed Shafik. The driver didn't stop. The accident—if it was an accident—took place two months ago on the fourth of March.”

Blunt stared at the page. “The fourth of the third,” he muttered. “Four three. It's the same numbers.”

“Exactly.”

“So we can assume that's why Zeljan Kurst was in London,” Blunt murmured. “If this school is recruiting a new security man . . . Scorpia could be trying to get someone inside.” Blunt quickly read the advertisement in the *Times Educational Supplement*. A recruitment office in London was handling the appointment, but it was nowhere near Woolwich, the place where Kroll might have been killed. “Has this agency recruited anyone to take Mr. Shafik's place?” he asked.

“Yes. They have. The new man is named Erik Gunter. Scottish mother, German father. He was brought up in Glasgow and spent time with the First Battalion Scots Guards before he was wounded in Afghanistan. He received the Queen's Medal for courage. I have his file here.”

She passed it across. Blunt scanned it briefly. Gunter had come under fire while he was on patrol in Helmund Province. According to the report, he had almost cer-

tainly saved the lives of his entire platoon, but he had taken four bullets himself and had been invalidated home.

“What about this business with the vicar?” Blunt asked. “Does the school have a chaplain?”

“No.” Mrs. Jones glanced at the science officer, who had been sitting silently through all this. “The reference to the vicar wasted a great deal of time,” she said. “It didn’t seem to be at all relevant. At first, we assumed it must be a code name. You’ll remember that some years ago we dealt with an assassin who was known only as ‘the Priest.’ But in the end, Redwing worked it out.”

“It’s a mistake,” Redwing explained. “If you take the initial letters of the Cairo International College of Arts and Education—CICAЕ—and type them into an Apple iPhone, the machine auto-corrects them and you get the word *vicar*.”

“It’s the final confirmation,” Mrs. Jones added. “Scorpiа’s operation has to involve this school. But just to make sure, I checked out the electronic key. I sent Crawley out to Cairo and he reported back this morning. The school is guarded, fenced in, and monitored twenty-four hours a day. But there’s been a security leak. The key opens a door into the kitchen.”

Blunt sat in silence. Outside, an ambulance raced along Liverpool Street, the scream of its siren hanging in the air. And what would it find at the end of its journey? Another life or another death? “Tell me about the school,” he said.

Mrs. Jones was ready for this. She wouldn’t have come

to Blunt's office without being fully briefed. "The CICAЕ makes an interesting Scorpia target," she said. *Target*. That was the other word that had been retrieved from the phone. "The school maintains a very large security staff—and with good reason. It has about four hundred children from countries all over the world, and if you look down the names, it's like a who's who of the rich and famous. They've got parents who are oil millionaires, politicians, diplomats, sheikhs, princes, and even pop stars. The Syrian president has a son there. The British ambassador has a daughter. The chairman of Texas Oil—one of the biggest oil companies in America—has no fewer than three children at the CICAЕ. Can you imagine if one of them was kidnapped—or worse still, killed? Suppose Scorpia was planning to take over the whole school? They could threaten hundreds of the most powerful parents on the planet. They'd have enough leverage to start a world war."

"We can't be sure that's what they're intending," Blunt said. For a brief moment, something entirely different flickered across his consciousness. Seventeen years as head of MI6 Special Operations had turned his brain into a computer that never stopped functioning. Always there were connections, connections . . . What was it? Oh yes. A report that had crossed his desk a week before. The death of that boy in Gibraltar. Julius Grief. All this talk of schoolchildren had reminded him. He considered it for a moment, then moved on. The boy had tried to escape in a car and driven over a cliff. The body still hadn't been

recovered, but there was no way he could have survived. So that was that. It couldn't be related.

"Why else would they target a school?" Mrs. Jones asked.

"Let's consider the possibilities." Blunt thought for a moment. The eyes behind the square-framed glasses were bleak. He was weeks away from retirement. He hadn't expected this. "Scorpia is planning an assault of some sort on an international school in Cairo. They send Levi Kroll to London for reasons that are unclear but that seem to be connected to the recruitment of this new head of security. It may well be that Kurst was in London last February for exactly the same purpose . . .

"It would seem likely that they're planning to put their own man inside the school, although looking at his file, this man Gunter seems to be beyond reproach. He's a war hero, for heaven's sake! However, I agree with you. It seems a bit of a coincidence that the last head of security should have been taken out by a hit-and-run driver. So . . . let's assume that Kroll was killed by a rival organization, because if it had been his own people, they'd have made sure he had nothing in his pockets when he was found. In fact, the body wouldn't have been found at all. It seems to me there are two questions we have to consider. Is this the most likely explanation of what has occurred? And what should we do?"

"We could warn the school," Mrs. Jones suggested.

"I'm not so sure. Warn them about what? We can only

guess what Scorpia is planning and we have no idea when it's going to happen. We could talk to the Egyptian government, but they're unlikely to listen to us—besides which, we have to consider the bigger picture. What about the Syrians, the Americans, and all the other families? If we tell them about this, we'll have half the intelligence agencies in the world at each other's throats. It could all turn into a complete mess."

"But if Scorpia knew we were onto them, they might decide not to proceed."

"Exactly."

Mrs. Jones saw the glint in Blunt's eye and suddenly she understood. "You want them to go ahead," she said.

"I want them to try," Blunt agreed. "We could turn this whole thing into a trap. Just for once, we're one step ahead of them, and if they actually decide to make a move, this could be an opportunity to finish them, once and for all."

"But you wouldn't seriously risk the lives of the children at this international school?"

"Of course not. We'll put an agent inside to keep an eye on the situation, and the moment Scorpia shows themselves, we'll be ready for them." Blunt thought for a moment. "What we need—," he began.

"No." It was unheard of for Mrs. Jones to interrupt her superior when he was speaking. But she did so now. "We can't do it."

Blunt blinked slowly. "You know what I'm thinking."

Of course she did. Mrs. Jones had spent hundreds of hours with Blunt. Soon she might replace him. She knew him inside out. "We can't use Alex," she said.

"I'm sure you're right, Mrs. Jones. But you must admit that this would have been exactly the sort of mission for him. Put a fourteen-year-old into a school and nobody would look twice. Just like at Point Blanc."

"Alex is fifteen now," Mrs. Jones reminded him. "And that business in Kenya was the end of it, Alan." She didn't often use his Christian name when there were other people in the room, but for now she ignored Redwing, who had lapsed back into silence, waiting her turn. "He was badly hurt . . . burned. He was in the hospital again. We both agreed. He's been through enough."

"I'm not sure I agreed."

"We also have orders from Downing Street." Mrs. Jones didn't dare disobey an instruction that came directly from the prime minister, not when she might be weeks away from taking over at MI6.

Blunt understood that. "I still suggest we put one of our people inside," he said.

Mrs. Jones relaxed. "As a teacher?"

"A teacher or a cleaner. Get Crawley onto it. Smithers to provide surveillance and communications equipment. In the meantime, let's keep an eye on all known Scorpia agents, particularly if they show up anywhere near the Egyptian border." He turned to Redwing, as if noticing her for the first time. "Your thoughts, Redwing?"

“I just have a couple of things to add, sir,” Redwing said. “I have no argument with anything that Mrs. Jones has said, but it does seem a little odd that Kroll would have flown into Heathrow Airport and then traveled all the way across London to Woolwich, if that really was where he was killed. Why didn’t he just fly into City Airport? It would have been much closer.”

Blunt was pleased. It was exactly the same thought that had already occurred to him. “There are no direct flights from Cairo,” he said. “But for that matter, why didn’t he use a private jet?”

“What really puzzles me is the medical report. First of all, from the contents of the dead man’s stomach, we know that the last meal he ate included snails, roast pork, potatoes, and some sort of dessert made with Grand Marnier. It’s the sort of meal you might eat in Paris or London, but it’s not exactly what you’d expect from a man who’d just flown in from Cairo.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, even in first class, he wouldn’t have been served snails on the plane. And pork is an unusual choice in a Muslim country. For that matter we found no Egyptian spices or herbs of any sort. No rice or falafel. Of course, he could have been staying in an international hotel. He may hate Egyptian food. But it still feels strange.”

“And there’s something else?”

“Yes, sir. When we examined the body, we found a tiny fragment of glass buried in the back of the neck. It

had been driven in by the impact of the bullet.” Redwing paused. “It’s certainly possible that Kroll was shot in London, somewhere close to the River Thames. He could have been standing on one of the banks or perhaps on a bridge. He was shot and fell into the water.

“But the fragment of glass tells another story. He was inside, on the other side of a window. In which case the body was then taken and dumped in the river. But if that was what happened, what was the point? Is it possible that the body was meant to be found?”

“And you’re suggesting that the note was planted?” Blunt considered. “But why would Scorpia *want* us to know what they were doing?”

“It doesn’t make any sense to me, sir,” Redwing admitted.

There was a long silence. Blunt made his decision.

“We’ll go ahead and put someone in the school,” he said. “It may be a complete waste of time, but I can’t see that it will do any harm. Still, it’s a shame to waste the resources of an active agent.”

Mrs. Jones glanced at him. Once again, she saw what was going through his mind. Alex Rider would already be on his way to Cairo if Blunt had his way.

But it wasn’t going to happen. Alex Rider was history. Mrs. Jones had never said as much to him, but she had promised it to herself, and no matter what her own future was within MI6, it was one promise she was determined not to break.

PART TWO

ALEX

ANGLE OF ATTACK

“ALEX! YOU’VE OVERSLEPT AGAIN. Get yourself out of bed!”

Jack Starbright was standing in the doorway of Alex’s bedroom on the first floor of the house they shared near the King’s Road in Chelsea. It was seven forty-five in the morning and he should have been up and getting dressed, but all she could see was the back of his head with a clump of messy light brown hair poking out from underneath the duvet and the curve of his body beneath.

“Alex . . . ,” she said again.

A hand appeared, clutched hold of the pillow, and dragged it down. “What day is it, Jack?” The voice came from nowhere, muffled beneath the bedclothes.

“It’s Friday. It’s a school day.”

“I don’t want to go to school.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“You’ll find out when you’ve had your shower.”

Jack closed the bedroom door and a few seconds later Alex emerged from bed, wrinkling his eyes against the morning light. He threw back the covers and rolled into a sitting position, looking around the wreck that was his room. There were crumpled clothes on the floor, school-

books and folders everywhere, DVDs and games stacked up beside his computer, posters peeling off the walls. He and Jack had actually had one of their very rare arguments a few weeks before. It wasn't that she wanted him to tidy the room. That wasn't the problem. In fact, it was the other way around. He had insisted that she stop tidying it for him—as she had done every day for the last eight years. In the end she had understood. This was his space. And this was the way he wanted it.

He stripped off his pajamas and stumbled into the shower. The blast of hot water woke him up instantly and he stood there, letting it pound onto his shoulders and back. This was his favorite part of the morning, five minutes when he didn't belong to anyone—not to Jack and not to Brookland School—when he could collect his thoughts and prepare himself for whatever the day might throw his way.

He wasn't a spy anymore. That was the important thing. That was what he had to remind himself. Four months had passed without so much as a whisper from MI6. He had made it through the second half of the spring term and the first five weeks of the summer without being recruited, kidnapped, or forced into some hare-brained mission on the other side of the world. He was getting used to the fact that it was never going to happen again. He was tall now, five foot ten. His shoulders had broadened and he had virtually lost the little-boy looks that had been so useful to Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones. His

hair was longer. He was fifteen years old. There had been times when he had thought it was a birthday he would never see.

And what had happened in those four months? School, of course. Alex had even begun to think about college . . . It would be only three years away. He already knew that science and math were his strong suits. His physics teacher, Mrs. Morant, insisted that he had a natural talent. "I can see you at Oxford or Cambridge, Alex. If you just apply yourself and try to turn up for school a little more often." Then there were sports. Alex had been chosen as the captain of the first team at soccer. And drama—he was playing Teen Angel in the summer production of *Grease*, although he still wasn't convinced he could actually sing.

He seemed to be at home less and less, hanging out on the King's Road with Tom Harris and James Hale, who were still his two best friends. He played soccer on weekends and had joined a rowing club near Hammer-smith. He was in the fifteen-to-twenty-one group, and he loved the rhythm of it, slicing through the water on a Saturday afternoon, down through Putney and Richmond and on to Hampton Court, even if his muscles ached for the rest of the weekend. The cox, barking out instructions with an old-fashioned bullhorn, was a girl of his own age, Rowan Gently, and she was obviously interested in him. He had joked that her name sounded like their progress up the Thames.

But he was still seeing Sabina—even if most of their contact was made through Facebook. It wasn't easy being thousands of miles apart with an eight-hour time difference so that while Alex was getting up and frantically grabbing his clothes, she was still sound asleep. It was almost as if they were on different planets, and part of him knew that if she didn't return to England soon, it would be almost impossible to maintain their friendship.

He had seen her quite recently. Her parents had invited him out for ten days during the Easter holidays, and Jack had stumped up the cost of the transatlantic flight. It had given her a chance to have a break too.

It had been a fantastic vacation . . . something the two of them had promised themselves after their near-death encounter with Desmond McCain in Scotland at the start of the year. They had explored San Francisco—the Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf, Alcatraz prison—and driven down the winding coastal road to Big Sur, where they had spent the weekend hiking and camping in some of the most stunning countryside in California.

As he pulled on his trousers and set about trying to find two matching socks, Alex remembered the last night he had spent with Sabina. The two of them had sat together on the porch of the white-painted wooden house that Edward Pleasure had rented in Pacific Heights, a quiet, leafy part of the city. It was a brilliant night, the sky deep black and scattered with stars.

“I wish you didn't have to go back.”

“Me too,” Alex said.

“It’s crazy. You’re my closest friend and you’re thousands of miles away.”

“When do you think you’ll come back to England?”

Sabina sighed. “I’m not sure we ever will. Dad’s doing really well out here and he’s got his green card now, which means he can live here permanently. And Mum likes it.” She put her arm around his neck. “Do you think we’ll stay together, Alex?”

“I don’t know.” There didn’t seem any point in lying. “You’ll probably meet some American football player and I’ll never hear from you again.”

“You know that’s not true.” Sabina paused. “Maybe you can come back in the summer. You know you’re always welcome. We could go to Yellowstone. Or maybe to LA . . .”

“I’d like that.”

Alex remembered how Sabina had looked at him then. But it was the way she had kissed him good-bye that he remembered most.

Alex grabbed a shirt, but before he put it on, he turned around and examined his shoulders in the mirror. It was something he did automatically, every day. The burns had faded, but they were still there like a series of exclamation marks, the scars from the burning aviation fuel that had rained down on him in the airfield in Laikipia, Kenya. The doctors had told him they would probably stay with him for life. Well, he could add them to the mu-

seum of injuries that his body had become. The bullet wound in his chest, the various bruises, the thin white line that had been seared across the back of his hand by, of all things, a poisonous spider's web.

Did he miss it? Did he mind being an ordinary school-boy once again? Alex felt he had passed through a tunnel. There had been a brief time when he had needed the danger, when he was almost glad to be part of the secret world of MI6. After all, that was what he had been trained for virtually all his life. His father had been a spy. His uncle, Ian Rider, had been a spy. Between the two of them, they had made sure he would follow in what had become a family tradition.

But now he was out in the light. Enough time had passed since Kenya to remind him that real life was better. Herod Sayle, Dr. Grief, Mrs. Rothman, Major Sarov, Damian Cray, Winston Yu, and most recently, Desmond McCain. He had come up against them and they were all dead. It was time now to leave them behind.

He glanced at his watch. Despite Jack's wake-up call, he was going to be late for school—and this in the week when the principal, Mr. Lee, had announced double detention for latecomers, part of Brookland's annual crack-down on personal discipline. One term it had been crooked ties and shirts out of pants. The next it had been chewing gum. Now it was timekeeping. It was good to have such little things to worry about. Alex buttoned up his shirt and looped his tie over his head. Then he hurried down to the kitchen for breakfast.

There were two soft-boiled eggs waiting for him on the table. Alex was amused to see that Jack still insisted on cutting his toast into Marmite soldiers. She was making coffee for herself and tea for him, and as he took his place, she brought the two cups over.

“Alex—you look a complete mess. Your tie’s crooked, you haven’t brushed your hair, and that shirt’s crumpled.”

“It’s only school, Jack.”

“If I ran the school, I wouldn’t let you in.”

She set the two cups on the table and sat down herself, watching fondly as Alex sliced off the tops of his eggs and dipped the first soldier in. “Have you got any plans this weekend?” she asked. “I thought maybe after you finished rowing, we could take off somewhere . . . get out of London.”

“Actually, I’m away this weekend.” Alex had forgotten to tell her.

“Where?”

“Tom’s invited me over. His brother’s coming over from Italy and we thought we’d get together.” Tom Harris was as much of a mess as ever, living with his mother after his father had walked out. Alex had met his brother, Jerry, when he’d first gone chasing after Scorpia, in Rome. Tom and Jerry. As Tom often said, the names told you everything you needed to know about their parents.

“Okay. That’s fine. I’ll put out a toothbrush and a spare set of clothes.”

Was there something in Jack’s voice? Alex glanced in her direction, but she seemed okay. She looked the way

she always did—relaxed and a bit ramshackle, dressed in a T-shirt, jeans, and a loose-fitting cardigan. She was sitting with her elbows on the table, cradling her coffee cup and smiling. But just for a moment she hadn't quite sounded like herself. It was as if she had something on her mind.

“Is something the matter?” Alex asked.

“No!” She pulled herself together. “No. I’m sorry. I just stayed up a little too late last night and I’m a bit tired.”

That would make sense. Jack had recently started teaching herself Italian. Alex wasn't quite sure why, although one of the reasons might have been the Italian teacher who was twenty-nine, dark, and built like a boxer. She was certainly taking it seriously with private lessons twice a week and tapes every night.

“You’re not worrying about me, are you? I haven’t heard a thing from MI6.”

“I know,” Jack said. “It’s not that.” She shook her head. “It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Ten minutes later, Alex was on his way, cycling to school on the new Raleigh Pioneer 160 that he’d bought to replace his old Condor Roadracer. It wouldn’t have been his first choice, but he’d managed to get a deal from the supplier and it was perfect for getting around London, not too flashy, not likely to get stolen. And after he’d changed the seat to an ergonomically designed Rido R2, it was comfortable enough too. Glancing around, he saw

Jack standing at the door, waving him good-bye. That was strange too. Normally, she wouldn't have left the kitchen.

But it was a beautiful spring day. The sun was shining. Alex forgot about her as he accelerated toward the King's Road. A moment later he had turned the corner and he was gone.

Jack closed the door.

She was annoyed with herself. She still hadn't talked to Alex about the letter she had received a week ago. It was typical of her mother to put it all down with pen and paper rather than to telephone or send an e-mail. Her parents weren't that old, only in their sixties, but they had always been purposefully old-fashioned—as if they were determined to show that their world was better than the one that was taking shape all around them.

And now her father was ill. He'd had a stroke at the start of the spring and he needed someone to look after him. Jack's mother did what she could. Jack had an older sister, but she was living in Florida with three young children of her own. Jack had now been in England for coming up to ten years and her mother was suggesting, very gently, that she ought to think about coming home.

And in her heart, Jack knew that she was right. Maybe it was time to go.

It wasn't just because of her father. She had her own future to think about. Here she was in London, almost thirty and single. She had first come to England as a stu-

dent with a place at St. Martin's School of Art, planning to become a jewelry designer. She had started working for Ian Rider to pay the fees and somehow she had allowed herself to get sucked into his world. In the early days, she would live at the Chelsea house when Ian Rider was abroad, taking Alex to school, then slipping away to do her studies until it was time to pick him up. But Ian had been away more and more often until it had made sense to move in permanently. Suddenly, without ever really choosing it, she had become part of the family, almost a big sister for Alex. She had adored him from the start, even when he was seven years old. And she felt sorry for him too. She had been told that both his parents had died in a plane crash, and she could see that Ian Rider was no substitute, not when he traveled so much.

And then Ian Rider had died and everything had changed.

Had she ever wondered about her employer? He had told her he worked in international banking and she had taken his word for it, but looking back, she knew that she had been foolish. No international banker kept three different passports in his desk drawer. Jack had come upon them once, looking for a pair of scissors, and she had asked him about them. It was the only time Ian Rider had ever been angry with her.

“Never ask me about my work, Jack. It's the one thing I'll never talk about. Not with you. Not with Alex . . .”

She could hear his voice now and wondered how she

could have been so stupid. No international bankers stayed away for weeks at a time—and certainly none of them returned with so many inexplicable injuries. Ian had been mugged in Rome, involved in a car crash in Geneva, and broken his arm skiing in Vancouver. He had joked about it, saying he was accident prone . . . until, that is, the final accident had revealed the truth.

What Alex didn't know, what Jack had never told him, was that she had actually decided to leave two weeks before Ian Rider had set off for Cornwall on the mission that had killed him. She had even gone as far as typing out her resignation letter. She had felt dreadful—but thinking about it, she was sure she was doing the right thing. She wasn't going to be a nanny and a housekeeper forever, and the longer she stayed, the harder it would finally be to break the bonds with Alex. She would still be his friend, visiting whenever she could. But it was definitely time to move on.

And then the news had come of Ian's death, the funeral, the first meeting with Alan Blunt, and the almost incredible truth that Ian had been a spy, working for MI6 all along. That was when Alex had been recruited. And what had persuaded Alex to risk his life that first time, investigating the Stormbreaker computer? He hadn't done it for his country. He hadn't done it out of respect for his uncle. No—MI6 had threatened to expel Jack from the country, and he had agreed to help them in return for a permanent visa so that she could stay.

How could she abandon him after that? As far as Jack knew, Alex had no living relatives. She had tried to find some trace of his grandparents, but it seemed that all four of them had died young. There were no uncles or aunts. The closest relative she'd been able to dig up was a cousin living in Glossop, and she couldn't quite imagine Alex starting a new life there. And so she had stayed. She was almost the only person in the world who knew his secret. So long as he was involved with MI6, nobody could take her place.

All that seemed to be behind them now. The last time she had seen Mrs. Jones, it had been a few days before Alex's fifteenth birthday at St. Dominic's Hospital in north London. Alex had just gotten back from Kenya—badly hurt—and that was when she had finally put her foot down and insisted that there would be no further missions, that from now on MI6 would leave him alone. Mrs. Jones had made no promises, but Jack had sensed that maybe she had won the argument. Certainly, she had heard nothing since.

In truth, Alex was probably too old for them now. He didn't look like a child anymore. Jack remembered how he had once crawled up a chimney when he was training with the SAS. He wouldn't be able to manage that again. There were probably SAS men who were smaller than him now.

But if Jack was relieved that this part of their lives was behind them, there was one side effect that she hadn't foreseen. Alex didn't need her so much now. That was

what it all boiled down to. He wasn't going to come home wounded with burns or bullet holes. There was no need to protect him. And the two of them were growing apart. Recently Alex had begun spending more and more time without her, with his friends. Take this weekend, for example. He'd casually mentioned that he was taking off with Tom Harris and hadn't even stopped to consider that he would be leaving her on her own. It was the same last spring, when he'd been away for two weeks with Sabina. Jack didn't mind. It was how it should be. He was a teenager. But she didn't feel wanted. And that told her that—at last—it was time to move on.

All she had to do was tell Alex. She would leave at the end of the summer vacation and together they would find someone to take her place. Of course he'd be sad. He'd probably argue with her, but in the end he'd see it her way. Jack got up and set about clearing the breakfast things. She had put it off too many times already, but her mind was set. She would talk to him when he got home tonight.

“Okay. We're going to start with a warm-up.” Grant Donovan, head of math at Brookland School, pressed a button and six geometric shapes appeared on the whiteboard. Each one had an angle marked x . “In three of these diagrams, x equals forty-five degrees,” he explained. You've got five minutes to tell me which, and the first person to finish gets this week's bonus prize.”

“I hope it’s better than last week’s bonus prize,” someone called out.

“The last one of you to finish gets a page of negative multiplications to take home.”

There was a general groan and everyone put their heads down.

Alex tried to concentrate on the shapes, but they were just floating in front of him, refusing to come into focus. All the triangles looked the same to him, like one of those puzzles in a “spot the difference” magazine. It had been the same in English Lit an hour before, trying to make sense of a passage from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. “If music be the food of love . . .” Or was it “the love of food,” and what did it mean, anyway? He was finding it hard to think. He could see the words on the page, but they refused to come together to make sentences.

He put his pen down and ignored the triangles. There was something on his mind, and he wouldn’t be able to do anything until he had worked out what it was. He played back the events of the day. He had gotten out of bed as usual, showered, and dressed. He’d actually finished his homework the night before—nothing to worry about there. He knew his lines for the school play. No money worries. He still had plenty left from his weekly allowance.

Then down to breakfast. He replayed the conversation with Jack and in particular the moment he had told her he would be away for the weekend. That was it. She’d

been upset. He'd actually challenged her about it, and although she'd denied it, he could tell from her voice . . .

Now that he thought about it, Alex realized that the two of them had been spending less time together recently. What with homework, the school play, the rowing, and all the rest of it, there were days when they hardly spoke at all. Suddenly he was ashamed of himself. Jack had always been there for him. She was always looking after him. But he'd given her the impression that she didn't matter to him at all.

He glanced out the window. There was a building site across the road, a new block of apartments going up opposite the school. Everyone was already joking about who exactly would want to live with a view of seven hundred teenagers—not to mention the noise at half past eight in the morning and a quarter to four every afternoon. The site was empty today. The builders seemed to come in more or less when they felt like it, but Alex noticed a single man making his way across the roof in a crouching run with a bag slung across his shoulder.

What to do about Jack? Alex made a resolution. He would talk to her tonight. He would tell her that he would be lost without her and that he needed her as much as he always had. Of course she knew all this, but it was still worth saying. And he didn't have to spend the whole weekend with Tom. Maybe he could come back on Sunday afternoon and the two of them could go over to Borough Market or something. The thought made Alex feel

more comfortable, and he turned his attention back to the first of the triangles. ABC was a right angle . . . ninety degrees. The other two angles couldn't possibly be the same, so no forty-five degrees here. Cross that one out and move on to the next.

Three desks away, a lean ginger-haired boy named Spencer was aiming a missile at someone in the front row. He was balancing a piece of eraser on a plastic ruler that he was bending back. He released the ruler, catapulting the eraser across the room. It missed the boy in the front row and bounced off the wall. Someone sniggered.

Mr. Donovan had seen him. "If you want to stay in the top group, Spencer, try not to behave like a fifth-grader. Okay?" He sounded more tired than annoyed.

"Yes, sir."

"Two more minutes. You should have cracked half of them by now."

Alex was nowhere near. He was suddenly aware that he wasn't feeling very well. It wasn't particularly hot in the classroom, but he was sweating. The skin on his forehead and the back of his neck was damp, as if he had caught a fever. There was a pounding in his head and he was almost finding it difficult to breathe. What was wrong with him? It was eleven o'clock in the morning. He hadn't had lunch yet, so for once the cafeteria couldn't be blamed. He felt a pain in his chest and realized that his old wound was throbbing like some sort of biological alarm clock that had just gone off. As if it was reminding him . . .

Or warning him.

The man on the roof. Suddenly Alex was back on Liverpool Street, stepping out of the offices of MI6 seconds before a sniper had opened fire with a bullet that had knocked him to the ground, almost killing him. What had he seen—out of the corner of his eye? No. It was impossible. It couldn't be happening again. Not here. Very slowly, forcing himself not to give anything away, Alex turned his head. He was just a bored schoolboy looking out the window, he told himself. If there really was someone there, if they were focusing on him even now, he mustn't give them an excuse to fire.

Because the man was a sniper. He had no doubt of it. Why else would he be running with his head down and his shoulders hunched unless he was trying not to be noticed? And what sort of builder carries a long, narrow leather bag across his back? There was no sign of him now, but Alex visualized the shape and the size of the bag and knew with the ice-cold grip of certainty exactly what it must have contained. Not a shovel. Not a drill. Not anything you might use to construct a block of apartments. Anyway, nobody was working there today. This man was there for something else.

And he was still up there somewhere, hiding. Alex looked again, scanning the seemingly empty roof. Yes. There he was, lying flat on his stomach with his head pointing this way. He was partly concealed behind a wall of scaffolding with a plastic sheet hanging in front of him

like a flimsy window. Alex couldn't see the gun, but he could sense it and knew there could be only one target it was aiming at.

There is a sort of telepathy between the hunter and the hunted, between the sniper and his target. Alex couldn't possibly know when the man was going to fire, but he jerked back instinctively, and it seemed to him that there was a faint tinkle and a thud at exactly that same moment. Right in front of him a gash appeared as if by magic in the surface of his desk, splinters of wood flying upward. Alex stared at the damage. The enormity of what had just happened flooded over him. Someone had taken a shot at him. Someone had tried to kill him. If he had still been leaning forward over his notepad, the bullet would have driven into the top of his head.

"Alex . . . ?" Mr. Donovan had seen the movement, but he hadn't noticed the tiny, round hole in the window. Even if he had, it would have taken him several more seconds to put it all together. Snipers do not fire into school classrooms—certainly not in England. As far as he could see, Alex had just had some sort of fit. Either that or he had been stung by a wasp. One or two of the other boys were looking around curiously. The diagrams on the whiteboard suddenly seemed a thousand miles away.

"Get down!" Alex didn't shout, but there could be no mistaking the urgency in his voice. "Someone's shooting at us."

"What?"

Alex was already on his feet, backing away from his desk, moving out of the gunman's sight line before he could fire a second shot. He knew that while he was in the room, he was putting the entire class in danger. Several of the boys around him had stood up, making themselves targets. Some of them had noticed the hole in the window and knew he was telling the truth. Panic was already sweeping through the room.

"Get down!" This time he shouted the words louder, but they still just stood there. Of course, this was Alex Rider. Everyone knew the rumors about him—that he was involved in things that it was better not to talk about. But this situation was just too incredible. It couldn't be happening.

And then there was a second shot. Tom Harris yelled and spun around, and to Alex's horror he saw that his best friend had been shot in the arm, that his jacket was torn, and that blood was already seeping through the sleeve.

"Everyone on the floor!" Mr. Donovan had finally taken command, and his order was followed by the crash of upturned desks and chairs as twenty-two boys dived for cover. Tom was the last to react, still in shock, one hand gripping his wound. Alex glanced at the window, knowing that he couldn't offer himself as a target. But if the man fired again, Tom would be directly in his line of fire. Alex ran three paces and threw himself at his friend, rugby-tackling him to the ground. Tom howled with pain. His face was completely white.

Bells began to clang all over the school. Alex hadn't seen him do it, but he guessed Mr. Donovan must have hit the fire alarm before taking cover himself. Everyone was huddling together against the side wall. Alex propped Tom up, quickly examining his wound. There was blood everywhere—it was all over Alex's hands—but he didn't think his friend had been too badly hurt. A flesh wound only. If Tom had been unlucky, the bullet might just have chipped a bone, but Alex was sure it had gone straight in and out.

“Nobody move!” Mr. Donovan was shouting. “We're safe here. The police and the fire engines will be on their way.”

Brilliant. The rest of the school would be evacuating into the yard, making themselves perfect targets for the man on the roof. Alex thought of warning the math teacher, trying to explain what had just happened. But then he realized that it didn't matter. This wasn't a case of a psychopath with a grudge against kids. The man had come here for him.

And with that thought came a surge of anger so powerful that Alex felt himself almost overwhelmed. He had given up spying. He hadn't been near MI6 for months. He was just a schoolboy trying to get through the day. But someone thought otherwise. Someone had made the cold-blooded decision to send a man with a gun to kill him and to hurt anyone else who happened to get in the way. Who was it? Was this revenge for something Alex

had done in the past? Or was this some new enemy with a plan of his own?

Alex had to know. If the sniper got away today, he would be free to come back tomorrow or the day after. In fact, Alex would be in permanent danger. In the space of a second he had been plunged back into his old life and he didn't want to be there. He was furious.

"Alex! What do you think you're doing?"

Alex was already on his feet. Mr. Donovan stared at him, still crouching, afraid to move. "Don't leave, Alex! You've got to stay here!"

But he was too late. Alex had crossed the room and thrown open the door. A second later he had disappeared into the corridor, fighting his way past the rest of the school as they surged down the corridors, following the well-practiced fire drills that would take them outside.

As he burst into the yard, he was already fumbling for his keys, heading for the bike shed. The bells were still ringing. All around him, seven hundred schoolboys were chattering and laughing, looking out for the smoke while their teachers tried to shout them into straight lines. Alex ignored them. He found his bike, unlocked it, and jumped on.

"Alex?" Miss Bedfordshire, the school secretary, had seen him. She tried to wave him down. Alex ignored her. He pushed down and swerved around her and then he was gone, disappearing through the school gates.



FLYING LESSON

A SITTING TARGET.

That was how Alex felt. He was cycling slowly around the side of the school right next to the building site where the marksman had been concealed, and he was very aware that the street was empty with only a few parked cars, that there were no witnesses, and that if the sniper was still in place, this time he wouldn't miss. He could imagine the crosshairs of the scope sweeping across the street, settling first on his shoulders, then on the back of his neck. Perhaps they were already there and one twitch of a finger would send him catapulting over the handlebars and into oblivion.

He jerked his head up toward the rooftop but saw nothing. Alex was gambling on the fact that the man had already made his getaway. He would have heard the school alarms go off and would have assumed that Alex had been evacuated with the rest of his class, that he was lost in the crowd, one uniform among hundreds. Surely that was what he would think. And with the police arriving (Alex could hear them now, the whoop of sirens coming from all four points of the compass, closing in on the school), he wouldn't want to hang around.

Where was he? Alex had hoped to spot him as he left.

But there was nobody in the building site, no sign of any movement on the roof or the ladders leading down. He drew to a halt, resting with one foot against the curb, listening for the sound of an engine. Somewhere, on the other side of the scaffolding and the half-built walls, there was someone in a hurry to get out of here. Where are you? Every police car in the country will be here in a minute. You don't want to hang around.

Without warning, a car appeared at the top of the road, a silver VW Golf, pulling out of the building site and turning away from where Alex was waiting. He couldn't see the driver, but he thought, from the shape, that it was a man and he seemed to be alone. It had to be the sniper. Alex pushed off again. Behind him, the alarms were still ringing at Brookland School. He heard the first police cars arrive, the thud of slamming doors, and men's voices barking out commands. There was no time to lose. Any minute now the roads would be cordoned off. If he was really unlucky, the sniper would get away while he was left behind.

The VW was driving quickly but without breaking the speed limit, as if not wanting to draw attention to itself. Alex pedaled harder to catch up—at the same time making sure he didn't get too close. It occurred to him that he had done this before, almost a year ago. Then it had been two drug dealers in a Skoda. He had followed them to a houseboat on the Thames, near Putney Bridge. He'd never thought he was going to have to repeat the

exercise . . . and this time it was going to be more difficult. The dealers had had no idea who he was. But one look in the mirror and the sniper would certainly recognize him. Alex swung his bike off the road and onto the sidewalk, crouching behind the parked cars to keep out of sight.

London is the slowest-moving city in Europe. Cars drive at an average of twelve miles per hour, and it's well known that the fastest way to cross the city is on two wheels. As Alex powered up the sidewalk, he remembered his uncle, Ian Rider, complaining as he sat in a jam. "I don't know why I bother with a BMW six-cylinder turbo-charged engine. I might as well drive a horse and buggy." Alex knew that his bike would have the edge on the VW. He could weave in and out of the traffic. He could ignore the lights. He could cut corners across the sidewalk. Provided they didn't reach any of the outer motorways, he'd be able to keep up.

The car reached a T-junction and turned left, heading toward the King's Road. Before it disappeared from sight, Alex memorized its license plate number. The letters spelled out a word—BEG 88. There were plenty of Volkswagens on the London roads and most of them seemed to be silver. It was helpful that this one should have a registration that was so easily memorable. Still on the sidewalk, Alex swung around the corner, narrowly missing a woman pushing a stroller. The Raleigh 160 was perfect for this sort of cycling. It wasn't too heavy and the

700cc alloy wheels were perfectly balanced, making it easy to manipulate while its twenty-one gears gave him all the speed he could ask for. They were heading west, out of London. The school was already a long way behind.

And then the VW signaled right. Alex looked for the turnoff but there wasn't one. They were passing a parade of shops with an Esso garage at the end. And that was where the car was heading. Alex swore to himself. He must have been chasing the wrong man! Snipers pulling away from their latest target don't usually stop to fill up with gas or buy themselves a Twix. Alex stopped for a second time, catching his breath as the VW rolled across the forecourt. He thought about cycling back to Brookland, then decided against it. There would be too many questions to answer. It would be easier just to go home and find Jack.

The car wasn't filling up. Without stopping, it had driven straight into the automatic car wash—and that was strange because there was a large sign reading **OUT OF ORDER**. From his vantage point on the other side of the road, Alex watched in puzzlement. As far as he could see, the driver hadn't even opened his window to drop a token into a slot, and yet as the VW disappeared behind the plastic screen, the brushes begin to rotate and jets of water shot out of the hoses running along the walls. It was as if the car wash had been waiting for the car. The sign must have been put there to stop any other drivers getting in ahead.

Alex stayed where he was, waiting for the VW to emerge. He was certain now that something strange was going on and that this was after all connected in some way with the shooting at his school. He could only make out the shape of the car. It was lost in the cloud of white foam that mushroomed against the plastic screen. Water and soap suds coursed along the concrete floor. The whole process took four minutes. At last the brush stopped and returned to its starter position, and a few seconds later the VW drove out.

Only it was no longer silver. It was now bright red. Had it been painted inside the car wash? No—exactly the opposite had happened. The silver paint had been stripped off to reveal the red beneath and the license plate had changed too. Parts of the letters had been washed away so that BEG now read PFC and the number 88 had become 33. This was all part of the plan! The driver had known that the police would be called. After a school shooting, every police car in London would be on the lookout for the getaway vehicle. Well, if they were looking for a silver VW with the license plate BEG 88, they would be disappointed. That car had vanished into thin air.

Alex knew now that this wasn't one man operating on his own. It would have taken a serious organization to arrange the trick with the car wash. Scorpia? The triads? They were both enemies of his, but he somehow doubted that either of them would come for him now, after months of inactivity. There would be no point. Even so, he would have to be careful. The car could be leading him into

further danger and he was completely on his own. Only Miss Bedfordshire had seen him leave the school and she had no idea which direction he'd taken. Only a few hours ago he'd been congratulating himself that all his troubles were over. How wrong he had been!

He followed the car down the King's Road as far as Eel Brook Common, a small patch of green parkland crowded with Chelsea residents walking their dogs. The car was pulling away, traveling at about thirty miles per hour, but luckily it was forced to stop at a red traffic light and Alex was able to catch up. He was absolutely determined. Whatever happened, he wasn't going to let it get away. But then the car turned off down Wandsworth Bridge Road, driving straight down to the Thames. Alex gritted his teeth and stamped down on the pedals. He knew that the roads widened on the other side of the bridge. A bicycle could keep up with a car in the traffic, but once they were over the river, he'd have no chance.

They stopped again and Alex was tempted to move closer, to try to get a view in through the side window. It might help later on if he could give the police a description of the driver. All he could see from here was a hunched-up figure wearing a cap. He wondered what sort of man could bring himself to fire into a crowded school. How much had he been paid? And that made him think again about the car wash. What sort of minds would have thought up something like that? What other tricks might they have up their sleeve?

And suddenly he was on Wandsworth Bridge. Only a

few weeks ago he had rowed underneath it, and he had wondered then how it could possibly have been built. Most of the Thames bridges were very elegant, built as if to ornament the river. This one was just a slab of reinforced concrete—functional and ugly. It was also very long, with four lanes of traffic, and Alex had to pedal hard to keep up, afraid of being seen but more afraid of losing the VW altogether. He glimpsed the dark gray water beneath him, stretching into the distance with nothing memorable on either side. The driver came to a roundabout and accelerated onto it without looking left or right. Alex did the same and was rewarded with the deafening blast of a horn and a fistful of hot, dusty air as a huge truck thundered past, inches away. He wobbled slightly as he fought for balance, aware that his legs were getting tired. It would be just as well if the car did speed off soon. Any farther and he might get himself killed.

But instead it seemed that the VW had reached its destination. It turned off down a narrow drive that snaked back toward the river, and as Alex slowed down, he saw it draw into a parking space and stop. A sign read Wandsworth Park, but it wasn't a park so much as an industrial estate, one of those little pieces of London that had somehow been overlooked. There were a couple of office buildings sitting side by side, facing the river. They were modern and unremarkable, two stories high with white walls and square windows. One of them advertised a mobile phone company. The other could have been almost

anything. A garage and auto-repair service stood opposite them, close to the water's edge, but it seemed to have closed down.

The whole area was covered in rubble, with abandoned tires, oil drums, and empty skips. Alex had stopped at the top of the drive, concealing himself behind a broken wire fence. He wondered how a place like this could have just been left to decay. Put a few houses on it, with views over the river, and surely it would be worth millions. But then again, this wasn't somewhere people would necessarily want to live. The noise of the traffic on Wandsworth Bridge was endless and the air smelled of diesel. Maybe a few run-down businesses was all it was good for.

The man got out of his car, then reached into the back and drew out the bag that he had been carrying on the roof. It was the bag that contained his weapon. Peering out over the rubbish, Alex got a better view of him. He was short, in his thirties, dressed in an anorak and jeans, with a cap hiding his hair. He was clean shaven and white. His movements were completely leisurely, as if he were on his way home after a round of golf. He closed the car door, locked it with a remote on his key ring, and began to stroll down toward the river. Alex chose his moment, then freewheeled down the slope and came to a skidding halt behind one of the skips.

What now? From this new angle he could see a concrete jetty sticking out into the fast-flowing water of the

Thames. The jetty was T-shaped and long enough to accommodate a dozen cars. But that wasn't what was parked there. A helicopter was waiting, a two-seater Robinson R22, one of the most popular flying machines in the world. Alex recognized the long tail, slanting upward, and the tiny bubble of a cabin resting on its grasshopper legs. It was perched at the far end, painted gray like the water behind it. Someone must have landed it here for the man in the VW. But if so, it couldn't be taking him very far. As far as Alex could recall, the Robinson had a range of less than 250 miles. Still, that would be enough to get it to the middle of France.

There was a narrow, three-story building at the other end of the jetty, right next to the river. It could have been a clubhouse for canoeists or perhaps some sort of outpost for the river police. It was wooden, painted white—but the paint was flaking and some of the windows were cracked. Alex assumed it was empty, but then the door opened and a second man came out, walking across the jetty, heading toward the helicopter.

The two men were about to meet. Alex knew he had to get closer, to hear what they said. He was still some distance away, crouching beside the skip, but fortunately the men were looking out over the river with their backs to him. Abandoning his bike, he ran down toward them, keeping low behind a slight rise in the ground. He was afraid the sound of his feet on the gravel would give him away, but the drone of the traffic was loud enough to

cover it. He threw himself facedown just as the two men met.

“So how did it go?” the man from the office asked.

“It was fine. Mission accomplished,” the sniper replied.

He was lying. Surely he must have known that he had missed his target. But maybe it wasn't in his interest to admit that he had failed. Not if he was hoping to be paid.

“Let's go then,” the first man said.

They set off together, heading for the helicopter. So was that it? Was he just going to sit there and let them fly off? Alex memorized the registration number—A5455H—on the helicopter's tail. If he telephoned it through to the police, maybe they could intercept the Robinson before it could land. But it wasn't enough. Alex could still feel the anger. These people had broken in on his life. They had tried to kill him and they had hurt his best friend. And calling the police would probably do no good at all. He remembered what had happened to the car. The pilot might press a button and change the registration of the helicopter. Maybe it would turn bright pink in midair. Suddenly Alex was determined. He wasn't going to let them get away.

He was up and running before he knew what he was going to do. The men had reached the helicopter and were climbing in. They were too busy concentrating on their own movements to notice him. Alex sprinted diagonally across the yard and onto the other side of the jetty. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the sniper buckling

himself into the backseat, his view obscured by the pilot, who was leaning across him. Alex spun to the right, heading away from them, and a moment later he had reached the three-story building that he had noticed, the one from which the pilot had emerged.

He couldn't take the two men on by himself. He was empty-handed. But there was always a chance he might find something inside—a high-powered hose, maybe, or anything he could use as a weapon. At the very worst there might be a telephone. His own mobile was still at school.

His hopes were dashed even as he burst in through the front door. He saw that he was in an office complex that might once have belonged to the river authority. The walls were painted pale green and there were a few old maps of the Thames and tidal charts pinned to a cork notice board on a wall. But it was empty, abandoned. The whole place smelled of damp and decay. He tried the door of an office. It wouldn't budge.

Outside, he heard the whine of the four-cylinder air-cooled engine and knew that the Robinson had started up. It would take about a minute for the rotors to achieve maximum speed and then it would be gone, disappearing into the sky and forever out of his reach. Alex looked around him. There was nothing here, just locked doors and a tatty staircase with peeling Formica, leading up.

The roof. Alex decided there was only one thing he could do, one way he could get back at the sniper. The

man in the anorak was pretending that he'd succeeded, that he'd hit his target. Well, Alex would show him otherwise. He would stand on the roof in full view and at least the people who'd hired him would know that he'd failed. Perhaps there would be some sort of punishment for lying to them. Certainly he wouldn't get paid.

He took the steps two at a time. On the third floor he came across a fire extinguisher strapped to the wall, and he grabbed it and wrenched it free. He didn't really know what he was doing. In his mind's eye he saw himself spraying the cockpit as the helicopter flew past, blinding the pilot. But that was ridiculous. The wind would whip the foam away before it got anywhere near. Could he perhaps hurl the extinguisher at the rotors? It was certainly heavy enough to do serious damage. But it was also too heavy to throw—and anyway, the helicopter would be too far away.

But it was all he had, and he was still carrying it as he clambered up the last staircase and crashed through a pair of emergency exit doors onto the roof. It took him just a few seconds to take in his surroundings. The river was right in front of him. Wandsworth Bridge stretched out to the left. The Robinson R22 was balancing on its legs, already weightless, about to lift off the ground. The pilot, wearing sunglasses now, with a pair of headphones over his ears, was coaxing the joystick. The sniper was in the seat behind him. Alex was above them both, but—as he had thought—he was too far away. However, that

might be about to change. In a few seconds' time the two men would fly right past him. They couldn't go the other way because of the bridge.

The helicopter lurched off the ground without any seeming effort. It was moving diagonally, heading toward Alex but at the same time away from him, over the water. By the time it drew level, it would be at least fifteen yards away. He couldn't throw the fire extinguisher that far. If he set off the foam, he would just end up soaking himself.

"If you want to stay in the top group, Spencer, try not to behave like a fifth-grader."

Somehow, incredibly, Alex remembered Mike Spencer in the classroom, the moment after he had noticed the sniper. He had been firing a piece of eraser with a bendy ruler, aiming at another boy. Could it possibly work? Yes! Why not? The TV antenna was right on the edge of the roof, and the fact that it was swaying meant that it must surely bend. The antenna had four metal rods that came together in the shape of a V. Alex ran over to it. He hoisted the fire extinguisher up so that it rested inside the V and then, using both hands, pulled it back. The whole thing bent toward him. Alex could feel the metal straining. If he let go now, he would launch the extinguisher halfway across the river. That was one advantage of being fifteen. He hadn't been this strong a year ago.

Suddenly the helicopter was level with him, filling his vision. He could feel the wind from the rotors beating at him, threatening to blow him off the roof, and the engine

howled in his ears. His hair whipped around his eyes, half blinding him. But he had a clear view of the sniper in the back window. The man turned and saw him. His eyes widened in shock. He shouted something. The pilot seemed to have frozen too. The helicopter wasn't moving. It was just dangling there, a perfect target, right in front of him.

Alex let go of the fire extinguisher. The TV antenna whipped forward, propelling it like a medieval catapult. The red metal cylinder hit the cabin, an oversized bullet that smashed into the glass, sending cracks in every direction. It wouldn't have been enough to bring the helicopter down, but the pilot jerked back instinctively, losing control. Alex threw himself to the ground as the tail of the helicopter swung around, scything through the air, inches above where his head had just been. He felt another blast of air tearing at his shirt and jacket, trying to drag them off his shoulders. For a brief second he glimpsed the terrified face of the sniper, upside down . . . or at least that was how it seemed to him. The pilot was fighting for control and might have regained it, but then the tail rotor clipped the edge of the building and there was a dreadful grinding and a snapping sound as part of the blade broke off. Lying flat on the roof, Alex covered his head with his hands, afraid that he was about to be torn to pieces. A slice of broken metal shot past him and shuddered into the brickwork.

And then the helicopter was gone, yanked into the air as if it were a fish on the end of an invisible line. It was

completely directionless, the whole thing spinning around and around. Alex dragged himself to his knees, gazing at his handiwork with a sense of disbelief. The helicopter was like a mad thing. He wondered what sort of nightmare the pilot and his passenger must be experiencing inside. It was still moving fast. Already it was a quarter of a mile away, mercifully flying upriver, away from the bridge. Alex stood up. The helicopter tried to right itself, but it wasn't going anywhere. It stopped, then crashed down into the river. There was a great explosion of white water and then nothing. Alex couldn't see any more.

Were the two men dead? Alex didn't know and, in truth, he didn't really care. He'd given them a lesson they'd richly deserved. After all, they had just tried to kill him. They had opened fire on a classroom full of kids and they hadn't cared what might result. Alex wondered if Tom Harris was all right. He was sure the injury hadn't been too serious, but he knew all too well the shock of being wounded by gunfire. He thought of phoning him, then remembered that he had left his mobile in his locker at school.

A couple of people had run out of the office and were making their way across the yard to the jetty. Alex had scratched and bruised his arms and knees when he threw himself down. His school pants were torn. More needle-work for Jack!

He limped back in through the emergency exit, climbed down the stairs, and went in search of his bike.



SAFETY MEASURES

SITTING IN THE BACKSEAT of his chauffeur-driven Jaguar XJ6, Alan Blunt was in a bad mood. He hadn't spoken a word in the thirty minutes it had taken them to drive from Liverpool Street, gazing out the window with narrow, expressionless eyes as if the entire city had somehow offended him. Mrs. Jones was next to him and she knew exactly what he was thinking. The two of them were breaking every rule in the book. They were on their way to see Alex Rider when really he should have been summoned to see them.

They already knew what had happened at Brookland—but then, of course, the whole country did. A gun attack on a school in west London was the sort of story that would travel instantly all over the world—and the intelligence services had been forced to move quickly to rein it in. This was Alex Rider's school. They had made the connection instantly and had done everything they could to turn media attention away. There was no sniper, they said, and certainly no sniper rifle. It was just some local vandal with an air gun who had managed to break into a building site and had fired a couple of shots at the windows. One boy had been slightly injured but nobody had been killed.

Even so, the shooting had been the main story on all the six o'clock news shows and would be on the front pages the next day. Tom Harris had been filmed in his hospital bed with one arm in a sling, surrounded by flowers and chocolates and looking quite happy to be at the center of so much attention. The police had mounted roadblocks all over Fulham and Chelsea. The home secretary had promised she would be making a statement to the House. All the children at Brookland were being offered counseling and the school would remain closed until the end of the week.

As a result of the media frenzy, two other stories were given less attention than they might otherwise have received. In a completely unrelated incident, a helicopter had crashed into the River Thames near Wandsworth Bridge. The police were still looking for the pilot and passenger. Neither had yet been named. And in Greece, one of the world's richest men, Ariston Xenopolos, had died after a long fight against cancer. He had left behind a fortune of more than thirty-five billion dollars.

Alan Blunt had been in one of his regular meetings with the Joint Chiefs of Staff when the news came in. He had left at once, joining Mrs. Jones for an emergency briefing. It was obvious to both of them that Alex had been the target. The sniper had missed—that much was known. But Alex seemed to have disappeared. He had last been seen cycling away from the school. When Blunt had heard about the helicopter crash just one hour later, he

had assumed at once that there must be a connection. That would have been typical of Alex. He was a boy of extraordinary resource.

Alex finally got home in the middle of the afternoon. Jack was completely shocked by what had happened, and when Mrs. Jones called her a short while later, she was in no mood for an argument.

“We need to talk to Alex,” Mrs. Jones said. “We’ll send a car around to bring him to Liverpool Street.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Jones.” There was ice in Jack’s voice. “Alex isn’t going anywhere. I can understand that you want to debrief him. But if you want to see him, you’re going to have to come here.”

“That’s out of the question.”

“Fine. Then you can forget about talking to him.” Before Mrs. Jones could interrupt, Jack continued. “Every time Alex has been into that building of yours, it’s been nothing but trouble. The last time was November. He came to see you because he had a journalist chasing after him—and what happened? You sent him to spy on Desmond McCain and he ended up in Kenya being almost fed to the crocodiles. Well, that’s all over now. He doesn’t work for you anymore. If you want to talk to him about what happened this morning, you can come over here, but don’t make it too late. He’s had a tough day and I want him in bed before ten.”

It was unheard of for the director of Special Opera-

tions and his deputy to be summoned in this way. Secret conversations need to take place in a secure environment and Blunt's office was exactly that. Nobody could enter without being scanned . . . for weapons or for recording devices. Any form of eavesdropping was out of the question. The windows had even been treated to deflect radio or microwave beams. It was impossible to find out who had been there and for what reason. Visiting Alex at his home in Chelsea would change all that. It was a completely unacceptable risk.

And yet, early that evening, the car drew up outside the elegant white-fronted house that had once belonged to Ian Rider, and Blunt and Mrs. Jones stepped out. Jack had refused to budge from her position, and in the end they'd had to accept that this was the only way. But then, of course, Alex was no ordinary agent. Recruiting him in the first place had broken all the rules. So perhaps they should have been prepared to make an exception.

Alex was waiting for them in the living room. Blunt could see at once that he was very different from the fourteen-year-old he had so often employed. It wasn't just that he was bigger, that he had filled out more. He was more confident too. Looking at him, Blunt was suddenly reminded of Alex's father. The resemblance was really quite remarkable.

Jack offered coffee, which was politely declined. She had already given Mrs. Jones a full description of what had happened after Alex left the school and the deputy director didn't waste any time.

“We’ve had divers and police down at the river,” she began. “It seems likely that both the pilot and his passenger managed to escape from the helicopter. Certainly no bodies have been washed up.”

“You’d think someone would have seen two dripping wet men climbing out of the water,” Jack growled.

“We’re still making inquiries. We’re still looking.” Mrs. Jones glanced at Alan Blunt, sitting opposite her. “It does seem strange that they managed to vanish into thin air. This was broad daylight, in the middle of London. They must have been injured. And yet as far as we can tell, no one’s had any sight of them.”

“Did you see the sniper, Alex?” Blunt asked.

“Not really.” Alex had changed into jeans and a T-shirt. He was barefoot, as if to stress that this was his home and he would dress how he liked. It felt strange having Blunt in the room, as if two worlds that should have been kept apart had somehow collided. “He was too far away and he had his back to me. But I got the numbers of the car and the helicopter.”

“They were both fake,” Mrs. Jones said. “We’ve got the car—we picked it up from Wandsworth Park—and we’re running tests for fingerprints and DNA. We’ve also salvaged the wreckage of the helicopter. But I have my doubts that either of them will lead us anywhere.”

“These were professional people,” Blunt agreed. “That trick with the car wash, for example. That showed a certain style—”

“Whose style?” Jack asked.

“We don’t know. We’ve spoken to the owner of the garage. He says he was paid to close the car wash for a couple of days and he doesn’t know anything else. We think he’s telling the truth. But the main questions we have to ask ourselves are—who would want to kill Alex, and why now? And more to the point, how do we stop them from trying again?”

Alex examined the head of MI6, who was sitting on the edge of the sofa with a very straight back, as if he were determined not to make himself comfortable. As usual, Blunt was completely businesslike, dressed in a slate gray suit with steel-rimmed spectacles and highly polished black leather shoes. Despite what he had said, he had somehow made it clear that it didn’t really matter to him if Alex lived or died. This whole thing was just a nuisance, something else to be dealt with in a busy day.

“They think I’m dead,” Alex said. “The sniper told the pilot. He said ‘mission accomplished.’ I heard him.”

“That may not necessarily be the case,” Mrs. Jones said—and once again she half glanced at Blunt as if she wasn’t sure she should continue. “First of all, we have to assume that the sniper was aiming at you. This will have been a very risky and very expensive operation, so whoever was behind it must have a very serious reason to wish you harm. It’s clear from what you say that the sniper lied to his employers, but even so, they probably guessed you’re alive. And when the helicopter crashed five minutes later, they’d have known it for sure. Which-

ever way you look at it, Alex, you're probably still in danger, and I'm afraid it's going to be out of the question, your going back to school, until we've sorted this out."

"How long will that be?" Alex asked with a sense of despair. Some people might have thought him mad, wanting to go back to school. But he'd been enjoying the term. Everything had been going well for him. He wanted to be with his friends.

"It's impossible to say. We have no idea who the enemy is or even why they've chosen this moment to attack you. Right now we have no clues. We're as much in the dark as you."

"So how are you going to keep Alex safe?" Jack demanded. "How are you going to stop them from trying again?"

Blunt and Mrs. Jones exchanged a look, and at that moment Alex knew they had already worked this out, that they had known what they were going to say before they had walked through the door. The same thing had happened after he had been attacked while he was surfing with Sabina off the Cornish coast. They had used the situation then. They would do the same now.

"I think Alex has to leave the country," Blunt said.

"No way!" Jack exclaimed.

"Please, Miss Starbright. Allow me to finish. He can't go back to Brookland and he can't stay here. As Mrs. Jones just said, it's too dangerous."

"You could give him twenty-four-hour protection."

“We’ll have people watching the house tonight—but in the long term, twenty-four-hour protection doesn’t exist. If an enemy is determined enough, he’ll break through the tightest barrier no matter how carefully it’s been constructed. No. While we investigate this business, Alex would be much safer with a new identity somewhere far away.”

“Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Blunt coughed delicately, his hand forming a comma in front of his mouth. “I want him to go to Egypt,” he said.

“Egypt?”

“To Cairo, to be precise. It just so happens that I needed to send one of my people out there anyway—”

“Alex isn’t one of your people!” Jack cut in.

Blunt ignored her. He turned directly to Alex. “I wasn’t going to involve you, Alex. You’ve made your feelings very clear and of course I’ve tried to respect that. But circumstances have changed. You need our help. We need yours. I have a job that is ideally suited to you. At the same time, it’ll take you far away and keep you safe.”

“What job?” Alex asked. The two words fell heavily from his lips.

“Alex, no!” Jack whispered.

Alex avoided her eye. “What job?” he asked a second time.

“It’s just a question of being in the right place and keeping your eyes open for us. All we want you to do is

report back and we'll do the rest." Blunt paused, waiting for any argument, and when none came, he went on. "The place is a school . . . a very good school, as it happens, so you won't even need to miss any of your studies. It's called the Cairo International College of Arts and Education, but the students just refer to it as CC—or Cairo College. It's for boys and girls aged thirteen to eighteen, although there's a junior school too. Many of the parents there are working in the Middle East. Some of them are high profile. Some of them are very rich.

"We have received information that suggests some sort of hostile activity could take place there sometime soon. Unfortunately, we don't know when and we have no idea what exactly it might entail. A kidnapping might be a possibility. Some of these parents could afford millions of dollars as a ransom, if it were demanded."

"Have you warned the school?" Jack asked.

"We're not sure that a warning would do any good," Blunt replied. "Not until we know more. However, we do have one line of investigation. Last week, the school appointed a new head of security, a man by the name of Erik Gunter. It seems very unlikely that he would be involved in anything illegal. As a matter of fact, he's a war hero. He was decorated by the queen. But at the same time, we can't believe that his arrival is just a coincidence."

"What happened to the last head of security?" Alex asked.

Blunt swallowed. "He had an accident. All we're asking

you to do, Alex, is to keep an eye on this man and report anything suspicious back to us. There's no need for you to get involved. At the first sign of any trouble, we'll step in."

"Wait a minute!" Jack exclaimed. "I can't believe you people! We asked you to come here because someone just took a shot at Alex. His best friend was almost killed! But all you want is to use him again."

"We want to protect him," Mrs. Jones insisted. "Honestly, Jack. I was against this myself at first, but it does seem to be the best solution. Nobody would think of looking for him in Cairo. We'll give him a false name. And the best thing about an international school is that the students come and go. The parents are always on the move. Nobody will ask any questions when a new face shows up. Meanwhile, we'll investigate the car, the helicopter, everything. We'll let you know as soon as it's safe for Alex to come home. It shouldn't be more than a few weeks."

She fell silent. Blunt was looking straight at Alex, waiting for him to reply. Jack shook her head, clearly unhappy. Alex realized it was all up to him. At the same time he wondered if he really had any choice. Only that morning, he had been celebrating the fact that his life had returned to normal. Out of the tunnel—that was what he had thought. How could he have been so naïve? The tunnel had reached out to draw him back in and once again he was lost in its darkness.

“I don’t mind going,” he said. “Mr. Blunt is right. If there’s someone after me, I can’t stay here. I can’t risk anyone else getting hurt because of me.”

“I could take you to America. We could go anywhere in the world!”

“I need to be at school somewhere, Jack. I don’t want to get any further behind.”

“Then we’re agreed?” Blunt said.

“Actually, I have a few questions,” Jack cut in. “Where is Alex going to live in Cairo? Who’s going to look after him? Is this international college a boarding school?”

“No.” Mrs. Jones shook her head. “We’ll have to find him an apartment.”

“Then make sure it has two bedrooms, because I’m going too!” Alex turned to Jack in surprise. He could tell from the tone of her voice that there were going to be no arguments. “I’m fed up sitting at home while you put Alex in harm’s way,” Jack went on. “I know you’ve said he won’t be in any danger—but that’s what you said last time, and the time before. Well, if Alex agrees to go, that’s his decision. But I’m not going to let him go alone. That’s mine. Both of us or not at all. Your call, Mrs. Jones.”

Mrs. Jones thought for a moment, then nodded. “I think it’s a good idea,” she said. “Alex?”

Alex was still gazing at Jack. “Are you really sure?” he asked.

“I’ve never been more certain about anything.”

“That’s great.” Alex smiled. “We can see the pyra-

mids together. And the Nile. And it'll be fun to have you with me."

"You can leave all the arrangements to us," Blunt said. "I'll alert our Cairo office that you're on your way. They'll give you everything you need."

"Then it seems we're all agreed," Jack said.

She got up and led Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones to the door. Their car was waiting for them, parked outside. Meanwhile, Alex sat on his own, his head in a whirl. Cairo! Part of him was excited. He couldn't help himself. It was an amazing city, somewhere he had never been before. And yet at the same time, he felt a great weight on his shoulders. It was all happening again.

Jack came back in. "They've gone," she said.

"Thanks, Jack." Alex got up. "Thanks for saying you'd come with me."

"I wasn't going to let it happen any other way." Just for a moment, Jack remembered that she had been planning to tell Alex her plans this very evening. Had she really been thinking of abandoning him, of moving on? Well, her parents and Washington would have to wait. "I guess they'll have to give me a new ID too," she said. "I wonder what I'll look like with a fake mustache." She sighed. "Are you going to do your homework?"

"I don't think there's any point."

"Then why don't I make us some supper? And you see what's on TV . . ."

• • •

Alan Blunt was in a better mood as they headed back toward Liverpool Street. Mrs. Jones had noticed the difference. "So you got what you wanted," she said.

"Yes." Blunt avoided her eye. "It's funny how things work out sometimes."

"I think you forgot to mention that Scorpia might be involved."

"I didn't forget. I preferred not to alarm him."

"He might have decided not to go."

"I would have said, all in all, that it's better for him to keep an open mind."

They drove on in silence.

"I want him to have backup in Cairo," Mrs. Jones announced suddenly.

"Who do you have in mind?" Blunt knew that there was a time when his deputy would never have spoken to him so directly. But he would soon be gone. Power was already transferring itself to her. "We could send Crawley, perhaps. Or Gerrard . . ."

"I was thinking of Smithers."

"An interesting choice."

"Alex trusts him. And he may come in useful, particularly if Scorpia does show up. Do you have any objection?"

"Of course not, Mrs. Jones. Whatever you think best."

The strange thing was that Blunt had been right all along. He never should have left Liverpool Street and he certainly shouldn't have visited Alex at home.

He and Mrs. Jones had been filmed getting out of the car from the window of the house opposite. The owners of the house were on vacation in Thailand, and although they should have returned by now, they had both fallen ill with food poisoning and were being treated in a hospital in Bangkok. Scorpia had arranged this, just as they had arranged for one of their teams to break into the house and set up their cameras on the second floor.

Alex's home had also been bugged. Two men dressed as telephone engineers had slipped in while Jack was out at the shops and placed recording devices in the kitchen, the living room, both bedrooms, and even dotted around the garden. The entire conversation with Blunt and Mrs. Jones had been recorded.

"I want him to go to Egypt . . . I have a job that is ideally suited to you . . ."

"We'll give him a false name . . ."

"I'll alert our Cairo office that you're on your way. They'll give you everything you need."

It had all been recorded, on film and on tape, proof that MI6 had once again employed Alex Rider and sent him to the Middle East. It would be put into the Horseman file, and over the next few days, that file would start to grow. Ariston might be dead, but his work would continue. Scorpia's operation had begun.



WELCOME TO CAIRO

THE MAN FROM THE EMBASSY had introduced himself as Blakeway, but Alex wondered if that was his real name. It somehow suited him too well. He was thin, elderly, hollowed out by the sun, and very English—wearing a crumpled linen jacket, a striped tie, and a Panama hat. He had been waiting for Alex and Jack at Cairo Airport, standing next to the metal tunnel that led from the plane.

“Miss Starbright? Alex? Very good to meet you. I’ve got a car waiting for you. Do come this way.”

They set off at a leisurely pace. Blakeway didn’t look like the sort of man who ever hurried. But it was good having him with them. They were waved through passport control. They didn’t have to join the long lines or buy twenty-dollar entry visas from the banking kiosks. Blakeway stood with them until their luggage arrived on the carousel, then carried Jack’s cases for her, leading them through the crowds of taxi drivers and tour operators clamoring on the other side of the arrivals gate.

The heat hit Alex full in the face. As they passed through the sliding doors, leaving the terminal behind them, it was almost like stepping into a furnace. Within seconds his clothes were sticking to him and he felt his

case dragging him down. Meanwhile, Blakeway was looking around the concourse.

“Where’s Ahmed? I told him I’d be only a few minutes. Ah! There he is!”

He waved at an official-looking black sedan that drew up in front of him, and a small, round-faced man in a white shirt and dark pants leapt out and began to busy himself with the luggage.

“That’s better. You two can hop in the back. The car’s got air-conditioning, thank goodness. It shouldn’t take us too long to get across Cairo—apart from the blasted traffic.”

A minute later they were on their way. The car was cool inside and the seats were soft and comfortable, but Alex couldn’t relax. He was worn out from the long journey and although he desperately wanted to fall asleep, he knew it wasn’t going to happen. London didn’t just seem a six-hour flight away. It was another world, and part of him wondered when he would see it again. What a fool he had been to think that MI6 would ever leave him alone. Perhaps it had been the same for his uncle, Ian Rider—and for his parents. They had all discovered the same thing. In the end, there was no way out.

Sitting next to him, with her head resting against the window, Jack Starbright seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. She was wearing large sunglasses that covered most of her face, along with a floppy white hat, but he could tell that she was concerned about him. She suddenly reached across and put a hand on his arm.

“We don’t have to stay,” she said quietly, so that Blake-way wouldn’t hear.

“I know.”

“I noticed a flight to New York leaving in three hours. We could be on it.”

“We’re here now, Jack. We might as well see what it’s like.”

Was it even true? Alex wondered what would happen if he asked the car to turn around, if he tried to get back on a plane. Would MI6 let him leave Cairo? Alan Blunt wanted him here and that was where he was. There would be no departure until the job had been done.

“All right in the back?” Blakeway asked. He might have overheard them talking after all. “We’ve got some water here if you need it. Just shout . . .”

He had said the traffic would be bad and he hadn’t been exaggerating. It was horrendous. They had joined a six-lane motorway, but there still wasn’t enough room for the thousands of cars jammed together, the drivers beeping at each other furiously as if it would make any difference at all. Alex stared out the window. It seemed to him that they had driven into a nightmare of steel and concrete, of sand and dust. Old-fashioned office blocks stood next to crumbling houses. Here and there, slender towers rose over the domes of mosques, but they were hemmed in by radio masts, electricity pylons, and cranes, tons and tons of ironwork fighting for control of the sky. Alex’s first impression was that Cairo was a very ugly city. It certainly wasn’t somewhere he would have chosen to live.

Somehow they fought their way through to the other side. The traffic thinned out a little and they found themselves in a suburb, quieter and less densely populated than the city center but still less than welcoming. Everything seemed half finished. They were driving down a street with palm trees and expensive Arabic-style villas on one side, but piles of rubble and broken-down fences on the other. For the first time, Alex saw the desert. It was there, in the mid-distance, an endless wave of drab yellow sand. It was as if Cairo didn't dare go any farther. It just stopped. And next to it there was nothing.

"Not much farther," Blakeway said. He sounded remarkably cheerful. Alex wondered how long he had been here. He turned to the driver and said something in Arabic. The two of them laughed.

And then they drove into a bright, modern complex, the automatic gates opening and closing behind them. It was called Golden Palm Heights, a private community of about fifty bleached-out houses and apartments surrounding well-kept lawns with sprinklers twisting in the sunshine and a good-sized swimming pool. It reminded Alex of a vacation village the sort of place you might rent for a week in the sun. The sedan drew in beside a neat block of apartments with terraces overlooking the pool.

"This is it! Let's go in. Ahmed can bring up the luggage."

They followed Blakeway up a staircase to a two-bedroom apartment on the first floor. The door was open

and he showed them in to a light, modern space with marble floors, air-conditioning, and an open-plan living room with sliding windows leading onto the balcony. There was a large fridge-freezer, an electric oven and microwave, and a fifty-five-inch plasma-screen TV on one wall. Everything was very clean. After the long journey, Alex had to admit that he was pleasantly surprised.

“I’m going to leave you now,” Blakeway announced. “I’m sure you want to get unpacked and go for a swim. If you need anything, this is my number here.” He took out a business card and snapped it down. “You’re only five minutes from Cairo College and I’m sure someone will turn up to show you around. Quite a lot of the students and some of the teachers live here at Golden Palm Heights. They’ll be here around four o’clock, after school, and there’s usually a rush for the pool. I expect it’ll be quite strange for you, Alex, being the new boy and all that.”

He went over to the window and glanced out, as if to make sure they were alone. When he turned around, his voice was lower and he sounded almost nervous. “I’m told that one of your people will be coming here on Sunday evening,” he went on. “He’ll give you further instructions and see that you’re properly equipped. But that gives you the weekend to acclimate yourselves, see a bit of Cairo. It’s not such a bad place once you get to know it. Well, I’ll wish you good luck, Alex. For what it’s worth, I’ve heard about you, you know. A few whispers, anyway. It’s very good to have met you.”

He called for Ahmed and the two of them left. Jack watched the car disappear through the gate. They were finally alone.

“A swim, something to eat, or a nap?” she asked.

“All three,” Alex replied. “But let’s start with the swim.”

Jack was keen to unpack, so Alex dragged a pair of trunks out of a case, got changed, and went down alone. He dived straight in and did six lengths, pounding through the cold water, leaving the heat and the grime behind him. He was still there, splashing around and enjoying himself, when the first students from Cairo College arrived back at Golden Palm Heights, threw off their backpacks and clothes, and dived in with him. Almost at once he found himself surrounded by two boys and a girl who were all about the same age as him and who seemed delighted to have a new face in the complex.

The two boys were Australian; Craig Daniels and Simon Shaw. Craig was tall for his age—in fact, he was huge. He needed to shave but didn’t. Simon looked like a surfer, from his tanned skin and long, fair hair right down to the bead necklace and brightly colored trunks he wore in the pool. The girl was named Jodie, and although she had been born in England, she had lived most of her life abroad. Her parents were both teachers, fortunately not at the CICAÉ. She had freckles and straw-colored hair cut short, and Alex liked her at once.

“Cairo College isn’t too bad,” she told him, in answer to his questions. “It’s pretty relaxed and the teachers

are okay. I spent two years in Singapore and that was miserable.”

“How come you’re out here?” Craig asked. Like Simon, his father worked in the oil industry. Quite a few of the families at the school were supported by Shell or BP.

It was the moment Alex had been dreading. It was hard enough making new friends, and doing so on the basis of a lie made it ten times worse. But he had no choice. MI6 had given him a false name—Alex Tanner—and had already rehearsed the story of his background with Jack. She would support him if anyone asked her. “I don’t have parents,” he explained. “My uncle works for an international bank and they’ve recently started working in the Middle East. He’s not here right now. I have a sort of guardian who looks after me. Everyone just decided it would be easier for us to be here.”

Like all good lies, the story contained a lot of truth. Ian Rider had pretended to be a banker before he’d died. MI6 were certainly active in the Middle East. And Jack was his legal guardian. At any event, it seemed to make sense to Alex’s three new friends.

“It’s okay,” Craig said. “Once you get used to the heat and the noise . . .”

“And the hawkers . . .,” Simon added.

“And Miss Watson.” The three of them groaned.

“Welcome to Cairo, Alex. You’re going to love it here.”

• • •

And over the next few days, almost despite himself, Alex began to relax. He would start at the college on Monday. Until then, he and Jack were tourists, on vacation together, and they could put the rest of it out of their mind. The first thing they did was to visit the famous pyramids at Giza, slipping in as the sun was rising and wandering almost alone around the extraordinary monuments built to house the bodies of dead kings almost five thousand years before. They took a felucca, a traditional wooden sailing boat, along the Nile. They explored Cairo together, strolling through the crowded streets of the souk—the local market—and haggling for things they didn't even want. They popped into mosques and museums, staying just long enough to say they had been. They visited the place where Moses had supposedly been found in the bulrushes and Jack got a picture taken of the two of them, arm in arm, grinning like idiots.

Craig and Simon had both been right. The heat in the city was almost unbearable, at least one hundred degrees without any desert breeze, and the hawkers never left them alone, trying to sell them everything from spices to pornographic postcards. Cairo had no center and seemed to have no way out. It was as if half of humanity had just piled in there and had decided to stay.

But they didn't care. They were enjoying themselves, closer than they'd been for a long time. Alex felt as if he had gone back five years, as if Ian Rider were still alive and Jack were looking after him and every day in its own

way was fun. He was almost glad that he'd been shot at. This wouldn't have happened any other way.

They didn't hear from Blakeway again, but returning home on Sunday evening, they noticed a new car parked outside the apartment and realized that the MI6 agent he had mentioned must have turned up. Sure enough, someone called from the front door, and to his surprise, Alex saw a plump, familiar man waddling slowly toward them.

He had last seen Smithers in his office on the eleventh floor of the Royal and General Bank in London, just before he had broken into the Greenfields research center at Salisbury. Alex had always had a soft spot for the man who had provided him with so many bizarre and useful weapons during his time with MI6. Seeing him now, he wondered how Smithers could possibly manage in this heat. It wasn't just the huge stomach, it was the three chins, the round cheeks, the neck that seemed to be melting slowly into the shoulders. Smithers was bald with a small mustache that reminded Alex of a comedian in one of those old, silent, black-and-white films. He was wearing a linen suit that billowed around him like a parachute. He was mopping his head with an oversized silk handkerchief, but as he drew up in front of them, he stuffed it back into his pocket.

“As-salaam alaikum, Alex,” Smithers chortled. *“That’s Arabic for ‘good evening.’ And you must be Jack Starbright. How very nice to meet you.”*

“What are you doing out here, Mr. Smithers?” Alex asked.

“Believe it or not, Mrs. Jones sent me to look after you.” Smithers beamed. “Let’s go and talk inside, shall we? I’m told you have a first-floor apartment. I hope it’s not too many steps!”

They made their way up and soon the three of them were sitting around the living room table. Alex had a glass of iced grenadine—still his favorite drink. Smithers had a beer.

“So you begin at the Cairo College tomorrow, Alex,” he said. “My job is to help you and also, as it were, to be the interface between you and London.”

“What’s going on in London?” Jack asked.

“They still haven’t found the helicopter pilot or his passenger,” Smithers said. “And no bodies have turned up, so we’re assuming they got away.”

“They tried to kill Alex. You must know who they were.”

“I’m afraid not, Miss Starbright.” Smithers lifted his beer. “Can I call you Jack? I feel I know you rather well, even though we’ve only just met. And I have to agree with you. It’s all rather mysterious. I’m not sure how the helicopter managed to land in the middle of London in the first place. It would have needed a flight plan, and for that it would have had to have a proper license. But so far all the trails have led nowhere.”

“Was it Scorpia?” Alex asked. He didn’t know why

he had said that. The name had just dropped into his head.

“I don’t know, Alex, old chap. They haven’t told me. The good thing is that nobody knows you’re here in Cairo. At least you’re safe.”

“You mean, he’s safe until someone tries to blow up the school,” Jack growled. “Then he’ll be right in the middle of it.”

“What exactly am I meant to do?” Alex asked. His face brightened. “And what gadgets have you got for me, Mr. Smithers? I’m sure you’ve got an exploding camel or something.”

Smithers shook his head. For once, he was completely serious. “This is a very unusual situation,” he said. “And we have to be careful. All we know is that the school is a target and a lot of young lives may be at stake. Imagine if the whole place were taken over by armed criminals. Such a thing has happened before, you know. Or suppose some of these teenagers were taken prisoner . . .” He pulled out a list of ten names and laid it flat on the table. “For what it’s worth, these are the ten wealthiest students at Cairo College.”

Alex glanced at the names. The third one down was Simon Shaw. He was the blond-haired boy he’d met on his first day. “I know him,” he said. “He was in the swimming pool.”

“His father is Richard Shaw. He owns about half the gas stations in Australia.” Smithers took the list and

folded it away. "Don't be fooled by the fact that the son is living in an apartment just like you," he said. "A lot of these young people don't want people to know how rich their families are."

That was an interesting thought. Perhaps Alex wouldn't be the only person at Cairo College with secrets to hide.

"We have to examine all the security systems in the school," Smithers continued. "Put simply, Alex, we need to be sure that it's safe. What about members of the staff? Are there any teachers with drinking or gambling problems? Now that I come to think of it, my old history teacher suffered from both. But we want to know about anything that could open them up to blackmail.

"And then there's this chap Erik Gunter. Now, I've seen his file and I find it hard to believe that he's turned bad. He took six bullets for his regiment while he was in Afghanistan. He spent nine weeks in the hospital recovering. He has no criminal record of any sort. But at the same time, he is their new head of security and it can't just be a coincidence that he's turned up now. That's where you should concentrate your efforts. We want to know everything he's up to. Who he meets, how much he spends . . . even what he has for lunch."

Smithers had brought a small attaché case with him and he opened it. The first things he took out were a pair of rather chunky sunglasses and a bright red plastic water bottle, the sort of thing sportsmen might use.

"These work together," he explained. "Everyone at

Cairo College carries water—and you can pour about a quarter of a liter in the top part of this bottle. The equipment is concealed in the bottom part. It's new technology, Alex, and highly classified. What it does is it uses people's mobile phones against them. Point the bottle in their direction and you'll hear everything they're hearing. The speakers are inside the handles of the dark glasses and go behind your ears. But it's better than that. You can actually activate mobile phones at a distance of up to fifty meters and turn them into bugs. Two teachers having a conversation in the yard? You'll hear every word they say."

He took out what looked like an ordinary plastic light switch. "This is the same design as all the light switches at Cairo College," he explained. "You can stick it on any wall—there's a resin on the back and nobody will notice it's there . . . one more switch among so many. It doesn't actually turn anything on or off, of course, but it's got a highly sensitive listening device inside and you can use it to hear through walls. Again, it's connected to the glasses.

"Finally, if you want to communicate with me, use this." He produced an old-fashioned notepad and a ball-point pen and handed them to Alex. Both objects felt slightly too heavy. "Anything you write or draw on this notepad will appear instantly on my computer screen," Smithers said. "Scribble down SOS and I'll be on my way. I've taken a house in the middle of the city, by the way, just off Al-Azhar Street, around the corner from

the souk. I'll give you the address or you can use the sunglasses."

"How do I do that?"

"There's a miniaturized GPS built into the left lens. You'll find the switch on the top." Smithers shut the case. "I'm working on a few other thoughts," he said, "but that should get you started." He took out the handkerchief and patted at his face. "Trouble with this country is it's damnably hot," he said.

"I'm going for a swim," Alex said. "You can come with me, if you like."

"No, thank you, old chap. I never swim. I once invented a miniature submarine, but it was pretty hopeless. For a start, I couldn't fit into it. And floating doesn't come naturally to me. But you enjoy yourself!" He got up and went over to the door. "Delighted to meet you, Jack. And take care, Alex. I'll show myself out!"

Alex and Jack waited until he had gone. Then Jack picked up the sunglasses and examined them. "So that was the famous Mr. Smithers," she said. "He was completely unbelievable."

"You mean . . . his gadgets?"

"I mean the size of him! But I guess it's good he's on your side." Jack handed Alex the sunglasses and went into the kitchen. "I'll make some supper," she said. "And then you'd best be getting an early night. You've got to be ready for your first day at school."



THE NEW BOY

THE CAIRO INTERNATIONAL College of Arts and Education was only a five-minute walk from the apartment, just as Blakeway had said. When Monday morning finally arrived, Alex set off with the two Australian boys, Craig and Simon, who had offered to deliver him to the main reception. Jack would have liked to have gone too but understood that Alex would feel more comfortable with kids his own age. But she still grabbed hold of him before he went and gave him a quick kiss good-bye.

“It reminds me of the first time you went to Brookland,” she said.

And the strange thing was, Alex was aware of the same nervousness that he’d felt when, aged thirteen, he’d left for secondary school. His new uniform—dark blue trousers and light blue polo shirt—felt ridiculous and he had to remind himself that everyone would be wearing the same thing. He guessed it didn’t matter how old you were. These feelings never went away.

Cairo College even looked a bit like Brookland. It was halfway down a wide, tree-lined avenue, a modern complex with a main gate and buses turning in, cars already pulling up outside, children of every age and size tumbling out, dragging backpacks and lunchboxes and pecu-

liar class projects made out of wobbling cardboard and paper. It occurred to Alex that schools all over the world are more or less alike. After all, a classroom is a classroom, a football field is a football field . . . and Cairo College had plenty of both. Even the noise was the same: the medley of shouting voices, the first bell, the stampede of feet on concrete. Is there any other type of building that identifies itself so quickly by the sound it makes?

What made Cairo College different was the burning sunlight, the brightly painted yellow walls (surely no school in England was ever painted yellow), the exotic plants and palm trees, and the thin scattering of sand in the main yard. The buildings had been designed so that the passageways were light and airy, opening onto different courtyards with benches and tables grouped together under wooden canopies so that everyone could have their lunch outside. There was a junior school, with about a hundred children aged eight to thirteen. But they were all contained in a single block, next to an Olympic-sized swimming pool. The three hundred boys and girls in the senior school had the rest of the place to themselves.

Craig and Simon escorted Alex through the main gate. They weren't allowed to continue without presenting their passes, which were electronically scanned by an Egyptian guard. Alex noticed that the same was being done for all the other students as they arrived. He was held up while his own pass was issued with a photograph that made him look as if he had just been mugged. Fi-

nally, the two boys left him at an office on the other side, where he was greeted by the school secretary, a smiling, motherly woman with a thick Yorkshire accent who made him fill out a lot of forms, gave him a copy of the school regulations, and then took him into the room next door. Here, he was surprised to find himself shaking hands with the principal of Cairo College, a man in his fifties who introduced himself as Matthew Jordan—“but everyone calls me Monty.” He was a New Zealander, a shaggy, easygoing man who obviously enjoyed his job.

“Alex, welcome to Cairo College. I hope you’re going to enjoy yourself. I guess it’s all going to be a bit strange at first, but we try to take things easy here. We don’t like bullies and we don’t like show-offs, but you don’t look like either, so I’m sure you’ll fit in fine. If you have any problems, my office is always open. Every new kid who comes here gets a mentor. Yours is waiting outside. Her name is Gabriella and I’m sure the two of you will get along. Good luck. I’ll see you around.”

Gabriella was sixteen and, it turned out, the daughter of the Italian ambassador in Cairo. She had been at the school for three years and—she wasted no time telling Alex—she was looking forward to getting out. She already seemed to be bursting out of her uniform. Her nails were painted bright red. From the way she walked, it was as if the whole place belonged to her. She took Alex to morning assembly, class registration, and then to his first lesson. After that, he didn’t see her again.

Monday at Cairo College . . .

It began with four one-hour classes, followed by lunch. The college taught exactly the same subjects as an English school with the single exception that there were no religious studies . . . Perhaps it was too sensitive an area in an Islamic country. The lessons were also more relaxed and the class sizes, with only fifteen or sixteen students, were small. Like the students, the teachers came from all over the world, and maybe because they were so far from home, they all felt a need to mix in. Alex's math teacher was from America, his history teacher was South African, and his English teacher was actually Japanese. They weren't quite on first-name terms, but Alex thought that if he stayed at the school long enough, they could easily become so.

Lunch was served out in the courtyard, a choice of salads, sandwiches, wraps, and pizzas. Again, because this was Egypt, there was no ham or pork. Alex wondered where he should sit, but he needn't have worried. Craig, Simon, and Jodie were waiting for him and called him over to their table. They seemed keen to introduce him to their tenth-grade friends, and from the way they described him, they could have met him months ago rather than a few days before.

"Tanner? That's a Scottish name." The speaker was a stocky ginger-haired boy named Andrew Macdonald, who was of course Scottish himself. There were quite a few boys from Scotland at Cairo College, connected by

the oil industry. Alex had already noticed that they were the one national group that preferred to stick together.

“I’m not Scottish,” Alex said.

“That’s your bad luck. So why are you here?”

Once again Alex went through his story. The fake name, the fake history. He still hated having to do it. He could feel it separating him from the rest of them.

“So where are your parents?” someone asked.

“They died a long time ago.”

“That’s tough . . .”

“I’ve gotten used to it.”

“How long do you reckon you’ll be here?” Andrew asked.

“I don’t know. They haven’t really said.”

There were two more lessons in the afternoon, then gym, then ECAs, which stood for Extra Curriculum Activities and included everything from drama to swimming and trekking in the desert for an International Award. The school secretary had told Alex to put his name down for at least two activities, and he had chosen drama and soccer—although he couldn’t imagine kicking a ball around in the intense heat. The last class was French, which was hardly needed, as most of the students at Cairo College spoke two or three languages anyway. It was taught by Joanna Watson, the teacher whose name had been mentioned in the pool at Golden Palm Heights. Alex supposed that every school had to have a Miss Watson; permanently scowling, short-tempered, unloved,

and proud of it. She was short and bullish and had threatened him with his first detention before she'd even introduced herself.

It was at the very end of the day that Alex had his first encounter with Erik Gunter.

The head of security appeared as Alex was leaving, letting himself out of his office on the ground floor. The two of them were suddenly face-to-face and eyed each other warily.

“Good afternoon. You’re the new boy. Alex Tanner? Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“My name is Erik Gunter.” Alex recognized the Glasgow accent. “I’m also new here. I just started this month.”

Gunter was younger than Alex had expected, not quite thirty. It was obvious that he had been in the army. He was incredibly fit, with the sort of overdeveloped muscles that might have been made for tattoos—not that Alex could actually see them beneath the black suit he was wearing. He had dark hair, but he had shaved it close to the skin, leaving only a shadow. He had a high forehead and glinting, sunken eyes. He wasn’t tall—in fact, he and Alex were about the same height—but Alex had no doubt that if it ever came to a fight, Gunter would be faster, stronger, and dirtier than him. He decided at once that it would never happen. If Gunter really was involved in some sort of conspiracy, MI6 could deal with him. This was one man he would leave well alone.

“Are you a teacher here?” Alex asked. He felt a need to say something.

“No. I look after security. Do you feel secure, Tanner?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Well, keep out of trouble and you’ll stay that way. I’ll see you around.”

Gunter made his way down to the main door. Alex saw that he walked with difficulty, that he even had difficulty opening the door. He wasn’t slow, but his whole body was somehow lopsided, as if the different parts weren’t receiving the right signals from his brain. Nothing about him quite worked and Alex remembered that he had been shot several times in Afghanistan. Was he really the enemy? The man was a war hero—and in his own way he had been friendly enough. Alex already felt bad about spying on him.

As far as Alex was concerned, that should have been the end of this first day at the Cairo International College of Arts and Education. He was looking forward to getting back to the apartment and telling Jack everything that had happened. But there was still one last encounter waiting for him and it was a very strange one.

He had managed to drift behind the other students and was virtually alone as he walked toward the main gates. The guards were checking everyone’s IDs and the last of the buses was just pulling out. The sun hadn’t started to sink, but there was a pink hue in the sky and a sense of calm in the air. Alex pulled out his card so that it could be scanned. And it was at that moment that he got

the impression that he was being watched. Actually, it was stronger than that. He was quite certain of it. It was like an electric shock, a shudder of something running through him as he became aware of somebody's eyes boring into him.

Slowly he turned his head and for just a moment he spotted a figure in a downstairs window, looking at him from behind the glass. It was Gunter's office. Alex was sure of it. But it couldn't be Gunter, as Alex had just seen him leave. It looked like a boy. Alex was sure he was wearing a school uniform. He glimpsed fair hair. The boy's face was just a blur. Alex tried to make it out, but almost at once, the boy moved away and instantly disappeared, like a mirage in the desert. Perhaps he had never been there at all.

But in that brief second, the heat of the afternoon was replaced by a shiver of something that he didn't quite recognize, as if something unpleasant from the past had chosen to reappear. He stopped and took a deep breath, forcing himself to forget what had just happened. He was allowing things to get on top of him. He had to focus his mind on what lay ahead.

The window was empty.

Alex hurried through the main gates. He didn't look back.

Jack was waiting for him when he got home. She'd spent the morning at the famous Egyptian Museum, looking at the treasures of the boy king Tutankhamun. In the after-

noon she'd gone shopping and she'd even met some of the other parents living at Golden Palm Heights. They'd all been very welcoming. Like their children, they were displaced and needed to make friends.

Alex quickly told her about his first day at the college. "You know, Jack, I think I'm actually going to quite like it there. Everyone's really friendly. The school's okay. And at least it's not raining."

"That's good, Alex. Maybe this is all going to work out after all."

And yet, much later that night, after he'd had dinner, done his first batch of homework, and watched half a bad film on satellite TV, Alex wondered. He had taken the smaller of the two bedrooms and was sitting at a desk with views over the back of the complex. There were no curtains and the night was very black, dotted with stars. The air-conditioning was on full and he could feel it blasting over his shoulders. He'd opened his laptop and logged into Facebook. The photograph on his profile page had been taken on a mountaineering vacation with his uncle, Ian Rider. The two of them were sitting next to each other on a ridge, both of them with ropes coiled over their shoulders. He wondered why he had chosen it.

He had eighteen messages, nearly all of them from his friends at Brookland. The first one was from Tom Harris:

Hey, Alex. Where are you, man? I'm out of hospital and now I know what it feels like to be shot. Hurt like

hell. ThANKs for dragging me down as I'd have just stod there and let that nutter hit me a secod time. I guess he ws aiming at you. Yes? Hope this doesn't mean you're in trouble again. Let me know, if you can. EVerYone talking about it. Brookland on News at 10, Daily Mail, Sun ETC. Now we're not allowed to talk to anyone. Typing this with one hand. Two weeks off school plus counseling. Ha ha ha. TOM

He quickly looked through the rest but didn't reply. How could he explain what had happened in the last few days? Finally, he opened a message from Sabina:

Alex . . . we saw Brookland on the TV and heard what happened. I can't believe someone tried to shoot you. Where are you now? Mum and Dad really worried about you and guess this has got something to do with you-know-what. You said you weren't getting into all that again. Really worried about you. James told me you've disappeared so hope you're somewhere safe. Let me know!!! Sab xxx.

Sitting on his own, framed against the darkness, Alex suddenly felt isolated, as if he were trapped in some sort of cyberspace, between two worlds. Here, in Egypt, he was Alex Tanner, in a new school, making new friends. But none of it was true and as soon as the job was done, MI6 would pull him out and he would disappear so totally and so immediately that it would be as if someone

had just pressed the delete key. And yet, what of his old friends, his real life in London? After what had happened, would he ever be able to return to it? Or had the sniper snatched it away for good?

He was about to turn the computer off and go to bed when he noticed he'd been sent a new e-mail. He reached out for the mouse and double-clicked.

Hi Alex,

Julius G wants to be friends with you on Facebook.

Respond now:

For a long minute he gazed at the screen, at the brief message and the green panel: CONFIRM FRIEND. He didn't know anyone named Julius, but that wasn't so unusual. He'd connected with lots of people he'd never met. So why did the name make him feel so uneasy? He thought again of the boy he had glimpsed in the window at Cairo College. It had been a boy, he was sure of it.

Right now, Alex felt he needed all the friends he could get. But not this one. He didn't know why, but some instinct told him to stay away.

Alex pressed the button: IGNORE.

He turned off the computer and went to bed.

Over the next two weeks, Alex fell into the natural rhythm of Cairo College. Monday was the quietest day of the week. Wednesdays were the worst, with the biggest pile of homework. School food was okay so long as you

avoided the pasta. He worked out which teachers he liked best and which ones he preferred to avoid, and he made plenty of new friends. He was still the new boy, but in an international school like this, with people coming and going all the time, people were more quickly accepted. At the end of the first two weeks he was called back into Monty Jordan's office and given his first report.

"You're doing very well, Alex," the principal told him. "Your teachers all say you're making good progress, although Miss Watson thinks you could focus a little more in French. How are you finding it?"

"I'm okay, thank you, sir."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. By the way, I see you've applied to join my politics set." This was one of the Extra Curriculum Activities. Alex knew that the Scottish boy, Andrew, and Craig were both in the group, which met once a week to discuss stories that had appeared in the newspapers. They also took part in a miniature version of the United Nations, with everyone pretending to be a different country. According to Craig, the last session had ended with Belgium invading Holland and China declaring war on everyone else.

But Alex wasn't interested in politics. He looked puzzled. "Actually, sir, I didn't apply."

Mr. Jordan frowned. "Didn't you? That's strange. Your name's down on the list." He took out a sheet of paper and examined it. "That's right. You're definitely here. Why don't you join us anyway? We've got a couple

of interesting events coming up and you might find it's fun."

Alex shrugged. It didn't make any difference to him—and it made sense not to offend the principal. "All right," he said.

"Great. I'll see you later in the week."

And so he talked politics, he played soccer (seven-a-side in the air-conditioned gymnasium), and he even got a small part in the Cairo College production of *Blood Brothers*. That made him think of Brookland. Right now he should have been rehearsing for their production of *Grease*. It struck him as odd that no matter where in the world he went, there were people trying to make him sing.

And yet Alex couldn't settle in completely. Although part of him felt ashamed of himself, he had a job to do. He wasn't here as a schoolboy. He was here as a spy. And that set him apart. There wasn't a moment when he was able to forget it.

The transmitting device that Smithers had given him, concealed in the bottom of his water bottle, worked brilliantly. It turned every mobile phone into a bug, and wearing the sunglasses, Alex was able to pick up conversations across the school yard. At the same time, though, it told him a lot of things he didn't want to know. Miss Kennedy, who taught chemistry and physics, was having an affair with Mr. Jackson, who was in charge of sports. Miss Watson had a mother in the hospital in England and

was desperately worried about her. Monty Jordan had just applied for another job in a school in New Zealand. These people weren't criminals or terrorists, and Alex hated prying on them. It made him feel shabby.

There was also a limit as to how much he could pick up. The guards spoke Arabic, so there was no point eavesdropping on them. And although he saw Erik Gunter a few times, the head of security seemed to make a point of never speaking to anyone. Alex had positioned one of the fake light switches outside Gunter's office and had spent as much time as he dared lingering in the corridor, listening to what took place inside the room. Gunter had made a couple of phone calls—one to a company that maintained the school alarm system, one to a doctor to order more painkillers. Either he was very careful or completely innocent. Alex still wasn't sure which.

At the same time, he did his best to assess security at Cairo College, the other half of the job that Blunt had given him. It was strange to sit in the courtyard and try to imagine himself as a terrorist. But if he were going to target the school, where would he begin? Who would be his first target?

And the truth was fairly bleak. The school had guards, identity cards, security cameras, wire fences, and alarms. But none of the guards were armed, and any well-organized group would be able to break in and take over the place in minutes. And if they were thinking about kidnapping—perhaps one of the names on the list that Smithers had

brought to the apartment—they wouldn't even need to come close. Simon Shaw, the son of the Australian gasoline king, walked home every day. Anyone in a car could just pull up and drag him in. All the rich kids at Cairo College were determined to live an ordinary life. And that meant no bodyguards, no armor-plated sedans, hardly any security at all.

The one weak link, the only lead they all had, was Erik Gunter. He was the new security officer. He must have been recruited for a purpose. If Alex could just break into his office, perhaps he might be able to pick up a clue and bring this whole business to an end.

On Friday afternoon, at the end of his second week, Alex stopped in front of the room on the ground floor, near the main entrance. The windows were locked and barred, but he had often seen Gunter going in and out through the door. He didn't use a key. He pressed his thumb against an electronic scanner and the door clicked open. Alex quickly checked out the technology. Behind the glass panel was a light sensor system, the same sort of thing that could be found in any digital camera. This would take a picture of Gunter's thumb, which would be turned into a series of dots by an analog-to-digital converter. Somewhere in the system, there was a second picture. If the two matched, the door would open.

Alex needed Gunter's thumb . . . and it needed to be connected to his hand. Cutting it off and pressing it against the glass wouldn't work. Nor would a photo-

graph. Cairo College had installed a sophisticated system that also incorporated a pulse and a heat sensor. Only the real, living thing would do.

But surely that was possible.

Alex took out the notepad and pen that Smithers had given him. Working quickly, he sketched an illustration of the door and the keypad. He wrote down the trade name—Securi-Scan—and the serial number. Then, underneath, he scribbled a message: *Can you get me in?*

He underlined it, then closed the pad and put it away. The image and the question should have instantly appeared on Smithers's computer screen. Hopefully he would come up with a solution over the weekend.

Alex picked up his backpack, threw it over his shoulder, and set off home.

IN THE PICTURE

ERIK GUNTER WAS AWAY for the whole of Monday at some sort of conference in Alexandria, handing over security to his assistant, an Egyptian named Naquib who spent the entire day either smoking or dozing in the sun. It was infuriating to know that Gunter's office was empty—but Alex couldn't break in without him. He had to wait for his return and it wasn't until the end of Tuesday that he finally got his chance.

It had been another ordinary school day, but Alex had been unable to concentrate, knowing that he was about to make his move. He had noticed Gunter at lunchtime, sitting with some of the teachers, drinking a glass of milk. He had never actually seen the head of security eat anything solid. Somehow he had managed to get through French, history, math, and all the rest of it. He'd gone swimming, rehearsed the school play. And finally he was on his own, hanging back after the last lesson had ended. He was fairly sure that he was the only boy left in the school. It was now half past three. The gates would be locked at four o'clock—allowing him a window of just thirty minutes. It might not be enough.

By now, Alex knew the movements of Gunter, Naquib, and everyone else whose job it was to patrol the

school and keep it safe. Gunter returned to his office at a quarter to three every day. He worked there for about twenty minutes, then went over to the main gate to watch the students leave. It was surprising that this was one part of his army training that he seemed to have forgotten. He repeated himself—and repetition is a gift to the enemy. It makes you predictable. It makes you an easy target.

Alex waited in the corridor close to the office until there was a click and the door opened. He moved forward, timing it so that he arrived just as Gunter emerged. He glanced briefly inside before Gunter closed the door. The lock engaged automatically.

“Tanner!” The security man was surprised to see him. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you,” Alex said.

“Why?”

Alex put his hand in his pocket. “I found this.” He took out an iPhone and handed it to Gunter.

“What about it?”

“Well, someone left it in class. I tried to start it up, but it’s locked. I thought you could find out who it belongs to and hand it back.”

Gunter scowled. With his shaven head and hostile eyes, he had the sort of face that showed anger very easily. “Lost property is no business of mine. You’ve got to hand it in at the gate. They’ll put up a notice and whoever’s left this can claim it when they get into school tomorrow.” He handed it back and began to move away,

again with that strange, fumbling progress that suggested his muscles and skeleton weren't quite working together.

He had taken only two steps when he turned around. "How are you getting on here?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Alex said.

"But you must be missing your friends in London."

"Yes. But I've got a lot of friends here too."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it."

Gunter clumped his way down the corridor, leaving Alex wondering how he could possibly have known that he came from London. Of course, Gunter could have looked at his file. But that was in the main office—and why would he have bothered to search it out? It was an interesting slip. Alex made a mental note of it.

The corridor was empty. It was three thirty-five. Alex was still holding the iPhone, cradling it in the palm of his hand, being careful not to place his own fingers on the screen. He hadn't actually found it. In fact, it had arrived over the weekend, sent by Smithers and delivered in a padded envelope with a single sheet of instructions. Alex tilted the iPhone, checking the screen. Yes. Gunter had left a perfect thumbprint. He searched for the little button on the side and pressed it. There was a slight buzzing sound and the whole thing began to vibrate in his hand as the image was reversed and then reproduced. It took about twenty seconds, and then a thin sheet of pink latex slid out of a slot where the power cable would normally have been attached. Alex pressed his own thumb onto

it, then wrapped the sides around. If the machine had worked, he would now be “wearing” Gunter’s thumbprint—but then, when had Smithers ever let him down?

He touched his thumb with the latex covering to the screen. The machine read the thumbprint, at the same time registering the blood temperature behind it, and the door clicked open immediately. Somewhere, in the near distance, someone called out. Alex didn’t move. It was one of the guards. If he came along the corridor now and saw the open door, that would be the end of it. But then he heard footsteps going up the stairs to the first floor. He looked left and right. He knew there were no cameras here, but anyone could appear at any moment. Gunter would be back in around twenty minutes. He had to move fast.

He went in and shut the door behind him.

The office was exactly as he had imagined it would be: clean, very tidy, half empty. There was a desk, a couple of chairs, a steel filing cabinet, bookshelves, and very little else. A large window, barred on the outside, looked toward the main gate. This was surely where the boy had been standing, spying on Alex as he left. Fortunately, Gunter had lowered the blinds before he left, so Alex could move freely without fear of being seen.

He began with the desktop. There was a diary with a few notes scribbled in English—but they all seemed to relate to meetings within the school and there were no addresses or telephone numbers of any interest. Gunter

had received about a dozen letters. Alex flicked through them. There were several job applications. A salesman from an alarm company was trying to make an appointment. The wife of the Italian ambassador had written in to complain about locals at the school gates wolf-whistling Gabriella. Again, there was nothing to suggest any conspiracy, but then of course Gunter was a careful man. Even though his office was locked, he wouldn't have left any evidence in view.

Alex examined the bookshelves. Gunter seemed to like murder mysteries and thrillers. There were books by Agatha Christie and Andy McNab. A guide to Egypt stood next to a thick volume called *Teach Yourself Arabic*. Neither of them seemed to have been opened. Otherwise the shelves were empty. Nor were there any pictures on the walls. The room gave the impression of someone who had just arrived or who was about to leave. Maybe Gunter didn't expect to be at Cairo College very long.

Next, Alex turned to the filing cabinet. It was locked and he was annoyed that he hadn't asked Smithers for something to help him break in. He remembered the zit cream he had been given on his first assignment. A few drops of that would have quickly burned through the metal. Well, he could always come back to the office another time, provided he hung on to the latex thumb.

He returned to the desk and tried the drawers. The first contained pens, envelopes, a flashlight, and a pile of report sheets, which Gunter must have been expected to

fill in every day. The second drawer looked like a medicine chest. It was filled with different pills and a bottle of some sort of white liquid that smelled of peppermint. It reminded Alex that Gunter was a sick man, a wounded soldier—and for a brief moment he was tempted to leave. He had no right being here, trawling through someone's private life. But it was too late to worry now. He had a job to do. He might as well get it over with.

Somebody knocked on the door.

Alex froze as a voice on the other side called out in Arabic. It might have been the guard he had heard earlier. Was he looking for Gunter? Or had he somehow worked out that there was an intruder inside? There was nothing Alex could do. If the door opened, there was nowhere to hide. Ten seconds passed. Alex listened to the sound of his own heart beating. Nobody came in. Whoever had been there must have gone.

Moving more quickly now, afraid that he might be discovered at any minute, Alex tried the third drawer. It was empty apart from a couple of brochures, advertising the college. He swung it shut again, then opened it a second time. Was it his imagination, or had something metallic moved somewhere inside the drawer? He had heard it, a distinct rolling sound followed by the clunk as it had hit the wooden edge. He took the brochures out. There was nothing underneath them. Unless . . .

Alex placed his hand flat on the bottom of the drawer and pushed. It tilted and he saw that he had discovered a

false bottom, that there was a secret compartment underneath. Gunter had dropped a Biro into the hidden space and it had rolled from one end to the other with the movement of the drawer.

What else was there? Alex put his hand in and pulled out a gun, made in Russia with a star engraved in the handle. Was that something Gunter kept for his job at the school? And if so, why was it concealed here? It had been resting on top of a map . . . the edge of the Sahara and an oasis town called Siwa. It seemed an unlikely vacation destination, although Cairo College did sometimes organize trips into the desert. Next out was a newspaper, a copy of the *Washington Post*, about a week old. The front page was given over to a big article about the president's plummeting approval ratings and, underneath it, a smaller one about pollution in the Gulf of Mexico. There might be something relevant inside, but Alex didn't have time to read it. MI6 could buy the same edition and do that for themselves. Alex memorized the date and set the paper aside.

There was nothing else in the drawer except for a bundle of photographs. Alex spread them out over the surface of the desk and examined them. Most of them showed a large domed building that reminded him of the Albert Hall in London but that, from the palm trees that surrounded it, was more likely to be somewhere in Cairo. The pictures had been taken from every angle. There were cars parked outside and people—many of them

young and carrying books—crossing the lawns that surrounded it. Some sort of school or university? This was a modern, liberated place. Some of the women were in jeans and hardly any of them were wearing head scarves or veils.

And then there was a picture of a room, perhaps inside the domed building. It wasn't so much a room as a wide storage closet or a cellar. Alex saw red tiles, old paint cans, and a mop in a bucket, leaning against a corner. What on earth could Gunter want with a photograph of this? The next picture was even stranger. It was a close shot of a coat hook, presumably in the same room. The hook was in the middle of a brick wall, shaped like a swan's neck. The edge of the metal had caught the flash, which was blurring much of the image. It certainly wasn't going to win any prizes in a "Views of Cairo" competition.

There was one picture left. Alex turned it over and frowned. He was looking at a photograph of himself. It must have been taken sometime in the past two weeks. It showed him in full school uniform, walking through the gates at the end of the day. The photographer must have been inside Gunter's office. Alex was in the far distance, barely more than an inch high. But it was definitely him. The definition was good enough for him to see his own face. Even so, there was something about it that puzzled him. He examined it carefully. There was definitely something wrong.

Alex took out his own iPhone—a real one with a three-megapixel camera—and took snaps of all the pho-

tographs he had looked at. Then he carefully returned them to the secret drawer, making sure they were in the same order he had found them, and laid the gun on top. He wondered if MI6 would be able to make anything out of them. Well, it was up to them now. He had finally achieved something. Maybe he had even bought his ticket back home.

Alex made sure he had left nothing behind, then tiptoed over to the door and listened. There was nobody outside.

He slipped out into the corridor and quickly walked away.

It was almost four o'clock. He was very late leaving. If anybody asked him what he was doing, he would say he had forgotten his homework and gone back for it. He passed the school secretary's office—there was nobody there—and went through the main doors, back into the searing heat of the yard. The gates were ahead of him. A couple of guards were standing there, smoking cigarettes, thinking their work was done.

And then he saw Gunter on the far side of the yard. He was talking on his mobile phone with his back slightly toward the school as if he was afraid of being seen. It was too good an opportunity to miss. Alex was already wearing his sunglasses. He stepped back into the shadows and took out his water bottle. He pointed it in the right direction, and a second later he heard Gunter's voice, so clearly that he could have been standing next to him.

"The House of Gold. Yes, of course I know it." There

was a pause. “Five o’clock tomorrow. I’ll come alone . . . Do you think I’m an idiot? And if I’m satisfied, I’ll authorize the final payment.”

Gunter hung up, then walked away, disappearing around the side of the building. Alex waited a minute, then darted toward the main gate. Suddenly, things seemed to be happening very quickly. The head of security must be on his way to some sort of secret meeting. A payment was involved. It had to be part of the conspiracy that MI6 was looking for. Alex had passed through the gate and realized he was standing in exactly the same spot where his picture had been taken. And it was then that he knew what was wrong.

In the photograph that he had seen, he had been standing on his own . . . as he was now. But he had never once left the school on his own. He was sure of it. Simon or Craig walked home with him every day. If it wasn’t them, it was Andrew or one of the other Scottish boys. Always there were other kids around. Alex left at the same time as everyone else.

So where had they gone? Had they all been airbrushed out? Or was he simply wrong? Had there been a moment when his image could have been captured with nobody else about?

It didn’t matter. The House of Gold at five o’clock the next day. Wherever it was, Alex planned to be there, and in his hurry to get back to the apartment, he didn’t look around and didn’t see Gunter emerge from the side of the

school to watch him, his lips stretched in a thin smile. Nor did he hear him make a second call.

“He listened in on the conversation. He’s taken the bait. He’s clearly not quite as clever as he’s cracked up to be. He’ll be there tomorrow. I know what to do.”



THE HOUSE OF GOLD

ALEX FOUND IT EASILY enough on the Internet. The House of Gold turned out to be some sort of shopping center specializing in jewelry. *Fine gems and all your gold & silver dreams.* That was how it advertised itself on the website. *Come and seek us for the best prices in Cairo.* The name should have given it away, but it still seemed an unlikely destination for a man like Erik Gunter.

“Perhaps he’s just going to buy a ring for his girlfriend . . . or his wife, if he has one,” Jack suggested.

“He said he was going to authorize the final payment,” Alex said. “You don’t do that with a wedding ring.”

“He doesn’t have to be meeting a jeweler. He could be meeting anyone.”

“It’s a strange place to want to meet . . .”

The two of them were sitting in the living room of their apartment. Jack had been waiting for Alex with two glasses of ice-cold lemonade and a plate of sandwiches. He was normally hungry when he got back from school. Outside, the swimming pool was crowded . . . There was a rough version of water polo going on, and Craig and Jodie had called out to Alex to join them as he passed. But he had gone straight to the computer. houseofgold.org.

Then he had told Jack what had happened, what he had found inside Gunter's office. It wasn't a lot to go on, he realized. Not after two and a half weeks in Egypt.

"He wasn't buying jewelry," Alex insisted. "He sounded . . . I don't know . . . mysterious. As if he didn't want to be overheard."

"You're sure he wasn't leading you on? Maybe he wants you to follow him."

Alex shook his head. "He couldn't have known I was listening to him. I was a long way away, on the other side of the yard."

"What about the pictures you found in his desk?" Jack had Alex's iPhone. She flicked through the images on the screen.

"I don't know. We'd better pass them on to Smithers. He can send them to MI6. Why would anyone take a shot of a hook on a wall? And what's this building? Do you think it's somewhere in Cairo?"

Jack held up the iPhone. "Nice shot of you," she said.

"Yes. But if Gunter took it, then it means he knows who I am."

"Not necessarily."

"Why else would he have it? You think he takes photos of all the new boys?"

They fell silent. Jack had been out in the sun and she was looking tanned. They both were. It reminded Alex how long they'd been away.

"What are you going to do about Gunter?"

"I suppose I'd better follow him." Alex went on before she could argue. "I'll make sure he doesn't see me, Jack. But I know that the House of Gold has got something to do with whatever's going on. Five o'clock. I can go there after school."

"You mean, *we* can go there after school. That's why I'm here, Alex. I'm keeping an eye on you."

"Thanks, Jack." Alex gulped down his lemonade. It was deliciously cold. "I'm really glad you came."

"Are you?"

"I don't know what I'd do without you. You're always there for me. And you make the best sandwiches."

Jack smiled. "You'd better get on with your homework," she said. "You don't want your teachers breathing down your neck."

An hour and a half of European history. Alex wondered if there were any other secret agents in Cairo being sent upstairs to do their homework. But he didn't complain. And an hour later, immersed in the invasion of France and the evacuation from Dunkirk, he was almost grateful that he could put everything else out of his mind.

The next day was a Wednesday. It was also the day when Alex realized that his time at Cairo College was drawing to a close.

He was having lunch with Andrew and some of the Scottish boys when one of the seniors came over to their table. It was unusual for the older boys to mix with the tenth-graders, but he realized that this one was examin-

ing him. He looked up into a face that he vaguely recognized: dark, spiky hair, blue eyes, pockmarked cheeks.

“Alex?” the boy said. “You don’t remember me?”

Alex did remember him. But he pretended not to.

“I’m Graham Barnes. I was at Brookland until last year when my dad got sent out here. You’re Alex Rider, aren’t you?”

It was the worst coincidence in the world. In their first term at Brookland, new boys were paired up with older students, more or less the same system that they had here. Alex had been looked after—quite well—by Graham. There was no point denying who he was.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s me.”

“Rider?” Andrew made a face. “I thought your name was Tanner.”

“My mother remarried.” It was the first thing Alex could think of to say. “Before she died,” he added weakly.

“Yeah. Well, it’s good to see you.” Graham nodded at the other kids. “I’ll see you around.”

The rest of them went on talking as they had before, but Alex noticed Andrew glancing at him once or twice and knew that he had been found out. He might not know the reason, but he knew that Alex had lied. It was like the seed of a poisonous plant . . . and very quickly it would start to grow.

The day seemed to last forever as far as Alex was concerned, but finally three thirty came and the end of school. The usual fleet of buses arrived, clumsily maneuvering

around each other in the space outside the main gates. Most of the school left on foot and Alex was among them. He noticed that Andrew avoided him. And maybe he had spoken to Craig and Simon, because even they left him alone.

He was glad to see Jack, who was waiting for him with a black-and-white cab. "Are you sure about this?" she asked.

Alex nodded. He was more sure of it than ever. "Let's go," he said.

The two of them got in and Jack leaned forward and gave the driver his instructions. She had printed up the home page for the House of Gold and the address was there in Arabic as well as English. She also made sure that the meter was actually running. It was a common trick for the Cairo drivers to leave it off and then to charge double the right price when they arrived.

The traffic in Cairo was as bad as ever, the air full of exhaust fumes and bad-tempered beeping. By the time the driver dropped them outside a smart hotel and next to the river, Alex and Jack were grateful to get out. Jack had brought Alex a change of clothes and he had wriggled into them on the backseat. When he got out, he was wearing a T-shirt, khaki knee-length shorts, and sandals. Jack took care of his uniform. Dressed in two shades of blue, he would have stood out at twenty paces.

It was only now that they saw that the House of Gold wasn't a house at all. It was an old paddle steamer, like

something out of another age, permanently moored on the sluggish brown water of the Nile. The boat was three levels high, painted white, with two huge paddles at the back and a single funnel close to the bow. At some time it had been converted into a gaggle of jewelry shops, each one built into the old cabins and staterooms. A gangplank led up from the quay. Its name was written in gold over the entrance on the main deck.

“What now?” Jack asked.

“We wait,” Alex said.

They found a little park with trees shading them from the sun and sat down on a wooden bench, tucked out of sight. From here they could see everyone entering or leaving the boat. Alex looked at his watch. It was five to five.

“I should come with you,” Jack said.

“No. It’s better if you stay here. If anything happens, you can call for help.”

If anything happens. Three small words. But Alex knew how easily they could tear his life apart.

And then another taxi drew up and Erik Gunter got out. He had on the same black suit that he wore at school with a small backpack on his shoulder. He paid the driver, then made his way over the gangplank and onto the ship. Alex didn’t hesitate. He was already on his feet, following, leaving Jack behind. And with all his attention focused on the head of security, he didn’t notice the gray Chevrolet that had been parked in the street, on the other side of the

park. Nor did he see the two men who had been sitting inside it, watching the paddle steamer just like him. But they saw him.

“Hey—that kid. Quickly. Get his picture.” The man spoke with an American accent.

“Why? What do you—?”

“Just do it.”

The second man raised a Nikon D3 digital camera and pressed the button, capturing Alex as he reached the gangplank, as he stepped on it, as he began to climb. “What are you interested in a kid for?” he demanded sourly.

“I know who that kid is,” the first man replied. “And you’d better get ready. It looks like we’ve got trouble.”

Erik Gunter made his way through the House of Gold, squeezing through the tourists and local visitors who crowded out the narrow passages. There were shops and stalls on both sides of him with jewelers standing outside, some of them wearing the dark red Egyptian fez, like magicians about to do card tricks. There was jewelry everywhere: the same necklaces and brooches that hung in every souk in Cairo. Little pyramids on chains, Egyptian hieroglyphics, lucky cats, scarabs, portraits of Queen Nefertiti and King Tutankhamen . . . thousands and thousands of different pieces on sale, all of them overpriced, half of them fake.

Gunter stopped beside one of the stalls. Immediately

the owner, a fat little man, was onto him. "What you want? I show you the best. I make you the best price." But Gunter ignored him. There was a mirror on the counter and he reached out and tilted it, as if examining himself. But in fact he was looking back the way he'd come, over his own shoulder. And there he was, skulking in the doorway of an antiques shop about fifteen yards behind him . . . Alex Rider. Gunter almost smiled to himself. It was just as he had said. This fifteen-year-old whiz kid from British intelligence wasn't quite so smart after all.

The trap was set. Everything was in its right place. Now all he had to do was finish it.

He continued forward until he arrived at a doorway with a CLOSED sign—the one place on the paddle steamer that wasn't ready for business. He rang a bell and waited. There was a buzz and the door clicked open. He paused for a moment, then went in.

The shop sold antique weapons. There were hundreds of them, spread out on shelves and in glass cases, hanging from the walls on hooks. Gunter ran his eye over swords and sabers, flintlock pistols, old army rifles and muskets, daggers with huge jewels set in the hilts. It was an interesting collision, he thought. Beauty and death. All these weapons had once been used by armies or nomadic tribes. The blades had severed flesh and bone. The guns would have cut down men, women, and children, sending them crashing into the sand. And now they were being sold as ornaments to hang in people's houses. Gunter

wouldn't have been able to live with them. He knew too well the truth about the pain that these things brought.

An old man, an Egyptian, had appeared behind the counter: round glasses, thin face, an old-fashioned wing collar and tie. The man hadn't shaved. Gray hair had spread over his chin and his cheeks as if they were diseased. He had thin lips and bad teeth. And finally there were his fingers, long and very precise—like those of a pianist. This was a man who had spent his whole life working with his hands.

“Mr. Habib?” Gunter asked.

“That is my name.” He spoke perfect English.

“I'm Erik Gunter. I think you were expecting me.” The old man didn't move. Gunter reached into his pocket and placed a small metal object on the counter. It was a silver scorpion.

The old man nodded slowly. “I was indeed expecting you,” he said.

“Do you have it?”

“Of course.”

The man called Habib reached below the counter and produced another gun. But there was nothing antique about this one. It was an L96A1 Arctic Warfare sniper rifle, gleaming and deadly, a perfectly machined and balanced piece of equipment. He laid it out for Gunter to examine. “I have made all the adjustments as requested,” he said. “Particularly to the trigger and to the static iron sights.”

“What about the ammo?”

“I will be supplying you with fifty 8.59-millimeter bullets. The gun has a ten-round box magazine.”

“Can it be traced?”

Habib looked pained. “I do not ask you foolish questions, Mr. Gunter. I do not ask you why you require a piece of killing machinery as finely crafted as this. I would suggest you do the same.”

“I apologize, Mr. Habib,” Gunter said, and, reaching behind him, drew a pistol out from the waistband of his trousers and shot the Egyptian once in the middle of his head. There had been almost no sound. The pistol was silenced. The Egyptian stared as if he couldn’t quite believe what had happened, then slumped forward. Gunter snatched the rifle away. He didn’t want it to be contaminated by the rapidly spreading pool of blood.

Moving quickly, he went behind the counter and found what he was looking for: a golf bag, big enough to hold the rifle. He took a cloth out of his backpack and wiped the barrel clean. This was the only part of the gun he had touched and he wasn’t going to leave fingerprints. Using the cloth, he lowered the L96A1 into the bag and zipped it shut. Finally, he reached into the backpack and found a cumbersome package with several wires and a switch. He flicked the switch, closed the backpack, and stuffed it behind the counter. He took one last look around. Then he left, satisfied with what he had done.

In his haste, he didn’t quite close the door.

• • •

Alex Rider saw him go past. He noticed that Gunter had swapped the backpack for what looked like a golf bag. For a moment, the two of them were almost next to each other. Alex was inside one of the stalls, pretending to examine a mother-of-pearl jewelry box. He glanced back as Gunter disappeared, then stepped out into the corridor. The obvious thing would be to follow the head of security. That was what Gunter seemed to be inviting. But then he noticed that the door of the shop was ajar.

He took out his iPhone and texted Jack, *Gunter leaving. follow him. will meet later.* That was him taken care of. Now to see whom he had met and perhaps what he had been given.

Alex made his way down the corridor, pushing through the crowds. The House of Gold had an air-conditioning system, but even so, it felt hot and sticky. A couple of salesmen waved gold necklaces at him, but he ignored them. He reached the door and gently pushed it open. It took his eyes a few moments to get used to the gloom. His eyes swept over all the weapons. The place was like a medieval arsenal. Then he saw the man lying with the top part of his body on the counter and his arms spread out protectively around him. He could have been asleep, but Alex knew instantly that he wasn't. And it wasn't a red cushion beneath his head. He could smell the blood in the sluggish air.

He backed out fast. He knew that he had finally ar-

rived at the heart of the conspiracy. Gunter had just killed this man and it was easy enough to guess what he must have been carrying in the golf bag. But still it made no sense. Was he acting alone or was he part of a larger organization? And what was the connection with Cairo College? Despite everything, this trail had led him nowhere. He still had no idea what was going on.

Alex was feeling sick. He just wanted to get back into the open air, and he wished now that he hadn't sent the instruction to Jack. Gunter was a killer. If Jack got too close, she could be in danger. He would call her again, the moment he was out. But for now he was fighting his way back down the corridor. The gold and silver jewelry seemed to hammer at him from every direction. He was almost suffocating.

And then there was an explosion. Alex was blown off his feet and he felt the entire paddle steamer tilt violently to one side. All around him, people began to scream, thrown off balance. Gold chains, ornaments, and brass plates came raining down. At the same time, a plume of black smoke came surging through the corridor, instantly wiping out his vision. He could hardly breathe. All the electric lights had gone off.

Somebody fell on top of him. He pushed them off and crawled on his hands and knees. The paddle steamer rocked back again—it was like being on some hideous fairground ride. The crowds were still screaming. And then there was a gushing sound and Alex felt water—

warm and evil-smelling—surge around his hands and knees. God! Erik Gunter—or someone working with him—had blown a hole in the side of the paddle steamer and it was sinking. If he didn't get out, he would go down with it.

Everyone else had had the same idea. The jewelers were stuffing necklaces and chains into their pockets, saving what they could. They had forgotten that once they were in the water it would only drag them down. The floor moved again, slanting backward, and Alex found himself clawing his way uphill. There were people everywhere, all around him. He drew up next to a sobbing Egyptian girl—she couldn't have been more than six years old. She was on her own. He reached out and put an arm around her, drawing her with him. Behind him, he heard the sound of shattering glass. One of the counters had come loose, rolled down the deck and into the wall. Gold coins and medals exploded out of it.

The girl was snatched away. Her father or uncle had found her and took her without a word of thanks. Alex could see the exit in front of him, a rectangle of light that slanted heavily to one side. He climbed toward it, dragging himself up with his hands. A minute later, he was out on the deck, sucking in the air, still tasting the smoke. The gangplank had fallen away. The paddle steamer was jammed into the side of the quay as if it had just crashed into it. Alex saw that the thick ropes that had kept it moored were preventing it from sinking altogether, al-

though they were already straining and would surely snap at any moment. People were hurling themselves over the side. Some of them preferred the river to the hard fall with solid concrete below. Alex decided to join them. He was already soaking wet. There was no point in risking a broken leg.

He slid down the deck and dived into the murky water of the Nile. He vaguely wondered what germs he was exposing himself to. They would probably kill him faster than the bomb. He broke surface and swam toward the quay, making his way through the pieces of debris that floated all over the surface. At the same time he noticed half-naked Egyptian boys diving off the edge, into the water. They weren't trying to help anyone. They were scavengers, looking for anything of value that might actually float.

Jack, of course, was gone. How would he contact her now? His iPhone would be ruined. Alex reached the side of the quay and pulled himself out. He examined himself. At least he hadn't been hurt. But he was filthy and battered by the force of the blast. He could taste the Nile water on his lips and wondered how many millions of germs he had managed to swallow. The bomb hadn't killed him. The river quite possibly might.

He crossed the quay, making for the park where he and Jack had waited. He guessed that as soon as she had heard what had happened, she would make her way back to the same spot. He found the bench and sat down heav-

ily. All around him, people were milling past, many of them dripping wet. There were white-suited police officers everywhere, already taking command, blowing whistles and shouting out orders. Of course, the police were everywhere in Cairo. This was a country that was always on high alert against terrorism. They would have spent months training for an event just like this. Alex shook his head. How could this have happened? It was the last thing he had expected.

And then there was a man standing in front of him. Alex looked up.

“Come with me,” the man said.

“What?”

The man opened his jacket, showing a gun in a holster under his arm. “You heard what I said.”

A second man had crept up behind him and dragged him to his feet. Both of them were in their thirties, clean shaven, with sunglasses. The man with the gun had spoken with an American accent.

“We have a car. We’re going to walk you there. If you do anything, we’ll shoot.”

Alex didn’t doubt them. There was a seriousness about them, a sense that they knew exactly what they were doing. This was something they had done before. One man stood in front of him. The other was right behind. Alex felt himself being lifted up and frog-marched into the road. There was a gray Chevrolet parked right in front of him. For a brief moment he considered a countermove.

Right now, before it was too late, jabbing with an elbow, then swinging around to kick out.

But the man had been expecting it. Suddenly his arm was seized and twisted behind his back. "Don't even think of it," he said.

Alex was bundled in. He was facedown on the back-seat of the Chevrolet. The door slammed. Both men had gotten into the front.

The road was clogged up with traffic but the car swerved around, performing a U-turn. And then they were clear, picking up speed, leaving the dead man and the wreckage of the House of Gold far behind.

THE BELL ROOM

THEY DROVE FOR FORTY MINUTES, heading for one of the many suburbs that were hardly separate from the city itself. That was the thing about Cairo. It was almost impossible to say where one area ended and the next began. If ever a city could be described as sprawling, this was it.

Alex tried to work out where they were going but soon gave up. He was lying on the backseat with his head facing the floor. This was what the two men had instructed. For the first part of the journey, he did what he was told, feeling, as the car lurched left and right, like a rat caught in a maze. But the farther they went from the House of Gold, the more the two men relaxed, and he was able to twist around so that at least he had a partial view out of the window. Most of what he saw was sky, but a few landmarks flashed by—the hideous modern construction that was the Cairo Tower, the American university, the minaret of one of the main mosques. Alex made a note of them. Later on, it might help to work out where he had been taken.

He had been dripping wet when the journey began, but somehow—a combination of the heat and the air-conditioning—he dried out a little as they continued. Eventually, the driver signaled and the car began to slow

down. Alex guessed they had arrived and he tried to sit up, determined to see where they were.

He was pushed down immediately. But in that one brief second he was just able to see an old-fashioned, possibly abandoned office block and a sign that read Cairo Islamic Authority before they turned off the road and drove down a ramp leading underneath the building.

The Islamic Authority? Alex wondered what he had gotten himself into. Why should a religious group have any interest in him?

The car stopped. There was a third man waiting for them. The back door was thrown open and Alex was dragged out. He found himself standing in a drab underground garage illuminated by strip lights that threw a hard white gloss over the concrete walls and floors. One of the lights was malfunctioning, buzzing and flickering. It made the place more nightmarish than it already was. There were about a dozen other cars already parked but no other drivers. Alex was alone with three dangerous men. Their hostility bristled in the air.

For the moment none of them spoke, and Alex was able to examine them for the first time. They were all of a type, about the same age, all in dark suits and white ties. They reminded Alex of the sort of people who went around towns knocking on doors, trying to convert you to some religion. The man who had first approached him—and who seemed to be in charge—was built like an American football player with huge shoulders and a thick

neck. He had a small upturned nose, fair hair cut like a nail brush, and watery blue eyes. His partner was similarly built, fit, possibly ex-army. His hair was dark and he was obviously mixed race . . . Native American, maybe. The third man, the one who had been waiting, was black, angry looking, smaller, and lighter on his feet than the others. He was looking at Alex with disbelief.

“Is this him?” he demanded.

“Yeah.” The fair-haired man nodded.

“What about Habib?”

“Habib is probably dead. The boat blew up.”

“What?”

“You heard what I said, Franklin. Right now, the House of Gold is on the bottom of the Nile. And this kid was there—”

“I had nothing to do with it,” Alex said.

“Shut up!” Fair Hair snapped out the two words.

“What are we going to do with him, Lewinsky?” Franklin, the black man, asked.

“We’re going to take him to the bell room.”

“Whoa!” The driver was unhappy. “We can’t do that!”

“We don’t have time to talk about this,” Lewinsky snarled. “And we’re not going to talk about it in front of him. We need answers to questions and we need them now. So let’s take him down and get on with it.”

Down? They were already in the basement. Alex didn’t like the sound of this, the way things were going.

“You’re making a mistake,” he began.

“Save your breath,” Lewinsky said. “You’re going to need it.”

Alex felt a hand shove him in the back and he was propelled toward an elevator. The driver pressed the button and the doors slid open at once. The elevator was a steel box. It was like walking into a refrigerator. The four of them bundled in and they were carried down. Alex was trying to quell a rising sense of panic. Too much had happened in the past hour—the discovery of the dead man, the explosion, the way he had been kidnapped in broad daylight. He had no idea who these people were or what they wanted. And what was the bell room?

But more than anything, he was desperately worried about Jack. He had sent her chasing after Erik Gunter. Right now, he needed to warn her about what he had seen on the boat. She needed to know the danger she was in. And it might well be that she had heard about the explosion. If so, she would be sick with worry herself. The least he could do was tell her he was still alive.

“I want to talk to Jack,” Alex said.

“Who’s Jack?” Lewinsky asked.

“She’s a friend. She looks after me.”

“What? You mean she’s like your nanny?”

Alex ignored the taunt. “I have her mobile number.” There was no response. “I just want to let her know that I’m okay,” he said.

Lewinsky smiled unpleasantly. “What makes you think you’re okay?”

They had traveled some distance underground. Alex could feel it in his stomach and in the sense of weight pressing on his shoulders. The doors of the elevator slid open to reveal a short, windowless corridor leading to a single wooden door at the end. Somehow Alex knew he didn't want to find out what was on the other side. But he had no choice. Franklin and the unnamed man had already left the elevator. Lewinsky laid a heavy hand on his shoulder and propelled him forward.

He walked down the corridor with a sense of dread, a long shadow stretching ahead of him. Franklin opened the door. It led into a large room that was indeed shaped like the inside of a bell, round with bare brick walls that narrowed as they rose at least two floors above his head. Alex didn't like anything he saw. The room had no windows and was lit by a single bulb dangling on a wire. The door was soundproofed. The floor was covered with a thick rubber mat. In the middle there was a wooden chair and to one side a narrow table that had been constructed so that one end sloped downward. The table had three leather belts and Alex could see at once that they were meant for him: one for his ankles, one for his stomach, one for his shoulders and arms. There was a bucket and a tap. The room had been designed for one purpose. There was no escaping it. It screamed at him everywhere he looked.

"Take a seat." Lewinsky gestured at the chair.

"I'm okay standing."

“You want to quit wisecracking and do as you’re told? I can make this much, much worse for you.”

“Why don’t you tell me who you are?”

Franklin and the other man exchanged a look, but Lewinsky didn’t blink. “You’re the one who’s going to answer the questions,” he said. “Now sit down!”

Alex went over to the chair. He sat down and watched with a mixture of curiosity and disgust as Lewinsky leaned down and pulled off Alex’s damp socks and shoes. Meanwhile, Franklin closed the door. Lewinsky straightened up and stood in front of him. Alex’s clothes were sticking to him. His bare feet dangled over the floor.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” he said. “What were you doing at the House of Gold?”

“What do you think I was doing?” Alex replied. “I’m a schoolboy. I go to the Cairo College of Arts and Education. You can call them if you don’t believe me. I was buying a present for my teacher.”

“Right—let’s get one thing straight and cut this out,” Lewinsky interrupted. “I know exactly who you are. You’re not a schoolboy . . . or at least, you may be. But you’re also a spy working for the British secret service. Your name is Alex Rider. So let me ask you again. What are you doing here in Cairo? Why were you on that boat?”

Alex’s head spun. He wasn’t quite sure how to respond. These people knew who he was. But how? Cairo Islamic Authority. Who were they?

“Look . . . I don’t know who you people are or what you want,” Alex said. “But I’ve got nothing to tell you.” He sighed. There didn’t seem any point holding information back. They would beat it out of him anyway. And why should he suffer in silence to protect MI6? It wasn’t as if he had chosen to work for them. “I was following someone,” he said. “A man named Erik Gunter. He’s the head of security at the Cairo International College of Arts and Education.”

“Why were you following him?”

“To see where he went!” Alex couldn’t resist the answer but immediately regretted it, seeing Lewinsky’s face darken. “There’s a possible threat against the school,” he went on. “I thought Gunter might be part of it. I heard him talking on the phone and he led me to the House of Gold.”

“And then?”

“He went into a shop. It was full of old weapons. I went in after him and there was a dead man there. I think Gunter must have shot him.”

“Describe this dead man.”

Alex did the best he could. “He was old. He had gray hair. To be honest with you, I didn’t look at him that closely. There was a lot of blood.”

“Habib,” Franklin muttered. “Habib’s dead?”

“That’s right. I saw the body and I left the room, and about ten seconds later the whole ship blew up. That’s all I know—and if you want to interrogate anyone,

you should be looking for Gunter. I can give you his address if you like. It might stop you from wasting your time with me.”

Lewinsky considered for a moment. Alex could almost see the thought processes unwinding behind his eyes. At last he came to a conclusion and Alex knew at once that it was the wrong one. “You’re working for MI6,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Why are you in Cairo?”

“I’ve already told you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Suddenly Alex had had enough. “Then why don’t you go and ——— yourself.” He spat out the swearword. “What’s the point in asking me questions if you don’t believe the answers?”

“You can make us believe you.”

“And how do I do that?”

Lewinsky must have given a signal. The other two men grabbed hold of Alex and pulled him to his feet. There was nothing he could do. They were much stronger than him. The two of them hauled him over to the table and forced him down on his back. Then, while Franklin held him, the man with no name tied his ankles, arms, and chest, drawing the belts tight. When they stepped back, Alex couldn’t move. He was lying at a slant with his bare feet slightly above his head. Meanwhile, Lewinsky had filled the bucket with water from the tap. It was the last thing Alex saw. A moment later, a black hood

was drawn over his head, blocking his sight and much of his air.

And with a surge of panic that he couldn't hold back, Alex knew what they were going to do. He knew what this was called. Waterboarding. It was a method of torture that American soldiers had supposedly used in Guantánamo Bay, one that they favored because it left no bruises or signs of injury. And yet it was horribly effective. Alex had read somewhere that a grown man was unlikely to last more than fourteen seconds before he begged to tell his inquisitors everything.

Effectively, they were going to drown him.

"I want to know why you're here and what really happened on that boat." Lewinsky's voice was muffled. It came out of nowhere.

"I've told you!" Alex shouted through the cloth.

"You haven't told me anything. But you will . . ."

Alex felt the extra weight as a towel was laid across his face. Desperately he shook his head from side to side, trying to throw it off, but then two hands clamped down on him, holding him still. Alex's hands curled. All the muscles in his legs and abdomen loosened as sheer terror took control. And then the first drops of water were poured onto the towel. He felt the dampness against his face and then, immediately afterward, the first symptoms of suffocation. He couldn't breathe. Worse than that. His lungs were tearing themselves apart, his whole body trying to swallow itself. He was going mad.

“What the hell is going on in here? What do you think you’re doing?”

It was a new voice, coming from somewhere miles away. Alex tried to scream. No sound came out. He honestly thought he was about to die.

“Get that thing off him!”

There was a hand scrabbling at his face. The towel had gone. The mask was torn off and light and air hit him at the same time. Alex was gasping. His mouth was wide open. He knew he wouldn’t have been able to survive a second more.

A man loomed over him, and at that moment Alex knew exactly where he was and who these people were. He would almost have laughed if he hadn’t still been in shock. Of course he should have recognized the sign. In Miami, they had been Centurion International Advertising. In New York it was Creative Ideas Animation. And here—Cairo Islamic Authority. Always the same initials. CIA. The man’s name was Joe Byrne. He was black, in his sixties, with white hair and the earnest, caring face of a family doctor about to give bad news. Alex had met with him twice before and, despite everything, knew him as a decent man, one who was usually on his side.

“Alex, I don’t know what to say,” Byrne exclaimed. The belts had already been untied and Alex had been helped to sit upright. “I only just heard what was going on.”

“Sir—,” Lewinsky began.

“Save it for the court-martial, Lewinsky,” Byrne

snapped. “God in heaven! What did you three think you were doing? This is a kid!”

“He’s a British spy!” Lewinsky insisted.

“He’s on our side. He’s helped us on two separate occasions. If it wasn’t for Alex Rider, Washington, DC, would no longer be there. Get out of here! I don’t want to see you right now. I’ll talk to you later!” The three men left. Byrne turned back to Alex. “Are you feeling strong enough to get out of here?” he asked. “Or do you need more time?”

“I’m fine.” Alex was still in shock, but he slid himself off the table and picked up his shoes and socks.

Byrne waited until he’d put them on. “Let’s get some coffee in my office,” he suggested.

He led Alex out of the bell room and back to the elevator. This time they took it up to the ground floor, neither of them speaking. Alex guessed that Byrne was giving him a few moments to recover . . . or maybe he was still fuming with anger himself. This time the doors opened into a more comfortable area with a reception desk, potted plants, mirrors, and chandeliers. “We rent this place from the Egyptian government,” Byrne explained. “Half of it is pretty run-down, but the rest of it is fine for our needs. This way . . .”

Byrne’s office was on the same level, with smoked glass blocking the view outside. Alex remembered his office in Miami. This one was almost exactly the same, with fairly standard furniture, a thick-pile carpet, a picture of

the American president on the wall. The CIA had offices all over the world and they were probably all identical. Byrne waved Alex to a seat, then picked up the phone and ordered two coffees. He sat down himself.

“First of all, I’m sorry about Blake Lewinsky,” Byrne began. “He’s not actually a bad agent, but this new breed . . . they’re young and they have no sense of proportion. Ever since 9/11, you only have to whisper the word *terrorism* and everyone starts behaving like Nazis or fascists. But this time he went too far. I swear to you, Alex, I’ll have him sent back to Langley and he’ll end up working in the canteen!”

“Forget it,” Alex said. “He didn’t hurt me.”

“He would have if I hadn’t arrived in time.” Byrne sighed. “I’m afraid there are some things I have to ask you . . .”

“There’s not much I can tell you,” Alex said. “But first I’d like to call Jack Starbright, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure. Be my guest.”

Byrne handed Alex the phone and he dialed Jack’s mobile. It rang several times, then went to voice mail. That worried Alex. There were plenty of areas in Cairo where it was impossible to get a signal, but he wouldn’t be able to relax until he had spoken to her. “Jack,” he said. “It’s me. I’m okay. I’ll meet you back at the apartment.” He didn’t want to add any more with Byrne in the room. He hung up.

The door opened and a young woman came in with

two cups of coffee and a plate of cookies. She set them down and left again.

“You know, Alex, I can’t believe you’re out here,” Byrne began. “Don’t tell me Alan Blunt persuaded you to work for him again!”

Alex didn’t answer. He trusted Byrne, but he also felt uneasy being trapped between two intelligence services. He would have to be careful what he said.

“So why are you here, Alex?”

“Why don’t you start by telling me what you’re up to?” Alex replied. “Why were your men watching the House of Gold? And who is Habib?”

“Did you meet with him?”

“No. One of your men asked me about him. But by the time I saw him, he was already dead.”

“You didn’t shoot him?” It was impossible to say if Byrne was joking or not.

“Of course I didn’t.”

Byrne nodded. “I believe you. This whole thing is a mess. It’s just a miracle that no one from that paddle ship was killed. Apart from Habib, that is.” He paused. “All right, Alex. I’ll tell you what’s going on. I guess I owe you that much. But if you’re involved—you and MI6—I want to know. Is that a deal?”

“Sure.” Alex helped himself to a coffee.

“Okay. We’re out here because the secretary of state is arriving this weekend. I don’t know how acquainted you are with American politics, but our secretary of state

is like your foreign secretary. You could say she's number two after the president . . . In fact, there are a lot of people who say she could be the next president. She's outspoken and she's hard-line but she's also very popular. And she's about to give a speech in Cairo."

Byrne took his own coffee. He looked uncomfortable about what he was about to say, unsure whether he should give away his secrets, but then he made up his mind and went on. "This is all being hushed up at the moment, but the speech is all about power. Who are the big hitters in the world right now? When it comes to talking about the big issues—nuclear weapons, war, terrorism—who should be sitting at the top table? Up to now, it's always been the Americans, you British, the Europeans, and so on. But there are new powers in the world. The Chinese. India. She thinks it's time to make a few changes. And—you're not going to like this, Alex—she doesn't think the Brits have a place anymore."

"It doesn't matter to me one way or the other," Alex said.

"No, of course not. Why should it? But it's going to make a lot of your politicians very angry. If you ask me, the secretary of state is playing politics. It's coming up to election time and there's a lot of anti-British feeling in the States right now. You remember that big oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico? And then there was that secret deal with Libya. A speech like this is going to make all the right headlines . . . for her. She's way out of line. Even the

president has tried to draw her in. But she's going ahead anyway."

"How does Habib fit into this?"

"I'm coming to him. Our job is to protect the secretary of state while she's in Cairo. It doesn't matter what she's doing or saying. That's got nothing to do with us. We're just here—we've been here for two weeks now—to look after her. And a few days ago we got a tip-off that somebody might take a shot at her, to prevent her from making the speech."

"Habib?"

"That was just one of the names he used. Mostly he was just known as the Engineer. He sold weapons, Alex. Very precise, high-caliber weapons such as sniper rifles. Actually, he'd provide you with anything from a samurai sword to a hand grenade. But he was a craftsman. Everything he supplied was deadly accurate. Now do you begin to get the picture? We get a tip-off. We know that the Engineer is in town, so we start to watch him. And then, four days before our secretary of state is about to make a big anti-British speech, a British secret agent turns up and—boom—there's an explosion and Habib is dead."

Byrne slumped in his chair. Maybe it was the heat. Maybe he was feeling his age.

"I'm not saying that Blake Lewinsky was right, but perhaps it explains what he almost did to you. Habib was dead and he needed to know why."

Alex's mind was in a whirl. There was so much he had

to take on board. The main question was—how much should he tell Joe Byrne?

First, Erik Gunter. When he'd left the boat, he'd been carrying a golf bag, and Alex had no doubt now that it must have had some sort of weapon inside. Was he here to assassinate the American secretary of state? And if so, who was paying him? Then there were the pictures he had seen in Gunter's desk. He couldn't show them to Byrne, as his iPhone had been destroyed by the Nile water. But the building, the room, the *Washington Post* . . . they must all be connected. And what about Cairo College itself? That was the reason he had been sent out here. It was the school, not some American politician, that was meant to be the target.

He needed to see Smithers. That was the important thing. Smithers could talk to Blunt and Blunt could talk to Byrne. Suddenly Alex felt an overwhelming desire to get out of Cairo. He didn't understand why, but he didn't like the way this was going. Not for the first time, he had a sense of invisible forces, of wheels within wheels. There was something happening here in Egypt that none of them understood.

"There's not much I can tell you, Mr. Byrne." Alex found himself talking before he even knew quite what he was going to say. "The reason I'm in Cairo has got nothing to do with your secretary of state. I was simply sent to keep an eye on the Cairo International College of Arts and Education in Sheikh Fayed City. There's a possibility

that some of the students there may be targeted . . . I don't know much more than that. I was following their head of security, a man named Erik Gunter, and he led me to the House of Gold. I told Lewinsky this, but he didn't believe me. Gunter was the last person to see Habib alive. I think he was the one who killed him, and if I were you I'd strap him down to your table and see where you get with the water torture and leave me alone."

Alex stood up.

"And now I'd like to go home. I'm worried about Jack."

Byrne nodded. "And I'd better put a call in to your Mr. Blunt," he said. "By the way, I hear he's on the way out."

Alex was surprised to hear it. "He's retiring?"

"Not by choice." Byrne reached for the telephone. "I'll get a car to take you home. Once again, I'm sorry about what happened."

A few moments later, the woman who had brought the coffee came back in and led Alex out to the street. Joe Byrne stayed where he was, deep in thought. Despite all the evidence, he had never believed that there was a British plot to kill the secretary of state. Now, after what Alex had told him, he wondered if he should change his mind. For a start, there needed to be round-the-clock surveillance on this man Gunter. He would also raise the security to level red and order another search of the Assembly Hall, where the speech was taking place. It had been searched twice already and on Saturday night, twenty-

four hours before the secretary of state arrived, it would be locked down completely.

The Assembly Hall. A huge domed building surrounded by palm trees in the middle of the University of Cairo. How could he ever hope to make such a place completely safe?

And what of Alex Rider? With a bit of luck, he'd be on the next plane back to England. Safely out of the picture. In fact, if the boy had had any sense, he would never have come at all.



PLAN A . . . PLAN B

JACK WAS WAITING FOR ALEX when he got back to Golden Palm Heights. In fact, she was out and running toward him before the CIA driver had even come to a halt. She half dragged him out of the car and into her embrace. “Alex? What happened to you? I’ve been so worried.” She pulled away from him. “Your clothes are all damp!”

“Yes. I took a dip in the Nile.”

“You were on the boat when—?” She didn’t want to put it into words. “I couldn’t believe it when I saw what had happened. For a minute I thought . . . Well, I didn’t know what to think. But then I got your message.”

The car with the CIA man moved off.

Jack noticed it as if for the first time. “Who was that?” she asked.

“It’s a long story, Jack. If you don’t mind, I’m going to have a shower and get changed first. I stink. And I don’t suppose you’ve got anything for supper? I’m starving.”

A short while later, Alex and Jack sat down to eat together on the balcony, allowing the warmth of the evening to wash over them. The sun hadn’t set yet but it was dipping behind the buildings, throwing soft shadows over the estate. The pool was empty. Alex knew that Craig and

Simon and all the others would be inside by now, slumped over their homework. He wished that he had so little to worry about.

Alex had changed into a baggy T-shirt and shorts. His hair was still wet from the shower and there was a bandage on his knee. He wasn't even sure when he'd scratched himself, but Jack had noticed it at once and had insisted on rubbing in half a tube of antiseptic cream. He had, after all, taken a dip in the Nile. It reminded Alex of all the times she had looked after him in the past. Some things never changed.

She had prepared an assortment of Egyptian dishes: hummus, olives, stuffed grape leaves, fried meatballs, and smoked aubergine—all served with warm *aish baladi*, or Egyptian flat bread. She was drinking chilled pink wine. Alex stuck to water.

"I was sitting outside the House of Gold, wondering what was going on, when I got your text," she said. "I didn't like the idea of leaving you, but I waited for Gunter to come out and I followed him like you told me to. He looked like he was going to play golf or something. He had a golf bag."

"I know."

"Well, he flagged down a taxi and I managed to get one just behind him. It was like being in a film. I followed him all the way across Cairo and I thought he might be going somewhere exciting, but in the end he went into an apartment just around the corner from here. I made a

note of the address. I think it's where he lives. Anyway, after that I wasn't sure what to do, but I was worried about you, so I went all the way back to the House of Gold . . . except that it wasn't there anymore. There were police everywhere and they were talking about a terrorist attack or something. My first thought was to call Mr. Smithers, but when I took out my mobile I saw that you'd called. I got your message and came back here."

She poured herself another glass of wine. "Now it's your turn. What happened on the boat? How did you escape? And who was the man in the car?"

Quickly, Alex told her about his own ordeal, starting with the dead man in the antiques shop, the explosion, his capture by the CIA, and the bell room. He left out the waterboarding. He didn't really want to relive the experience and he knew Jack would have been sickened. "That was a CIA car that brought me here," he concluded. "At least they were decent enough to give me a lift."

Jack shook her head. "This is absolutely typical of Mr. Blunt," she said. "He promised us there wouldn't be any danger, but we've already got dead bodies on boats, bombs, and political assassination. So what are we going to do?"

The question had been hanging in the air since he got back, and Alex had already been considering the answer. "I think it's time to do what Mr. Byrne suggested," he said. "We ought to leave."

"Back to England?"

"I suppose so." Alex had eaten enough. He put down his knife and fork and leaned back contentedly. In the distance he could hear insects of some sort—cicadas—that had already started up in the undergrowth. "I still don't know what's going on here, Jack," he said. "And my cover's been blown. There's a boy here from Brookland who recognized me, and it can't be long before people start asking questions. It's all getting out of hand and I don't want to be part of it."

"Do you think the school's under threat?"

"If I thought that, I'd stay. Cairo College is okay . . . even Miss Watson. But I've been there for almost three weeks and it all seems completely ordinary. The only reason we think it might be a target is because Mr. Blunt told us—and you're right, we can't believe a word he says. Anyway, after what happened today, it seems almost certain that he's wrong."

Alex went over it all in his head once again. But he couldn't see any other possibility.

"Erik Gunter must be involved with this visit," he said. "The American secretary of state. He'd been to see this big weapons dealer and that bag he was carrying . . ."

"It wasn't golf clubs."

"Exactly. Maybe he's a hired assassin. Maybe he's using his position at the school as some sort of cover. But the CIA is going to be watching him from now on. It's got nothing to do with the school and it's got nothing to do with me. So I might as well go."

Jack nodded. "Are you going to tell Mr. Smithers?"

"Yes. I'll go and see him tomorrow while you're doing the packing. You'd better also call the school and tell them I'm not well or something." Alex felt a little sad about that. He'd have liked to have said good-bye to some of the friends he'd made. But he knew it was better not to. There would have been too much to explain. "We can get a flight tomorrow afternoon."

"I agree with you," Jack said. She lifted her glass of wine and swirled it in front of her. "But there's just one problem. I'm not sure England's going to be safe for you, Alex. Remember how this all started. Someone tried to kill you."

Alex knew that she was right. "Where, then?" he asked.

"Well, I've been thinking. It's probably a crazy idea and you don't have to make a decision. But I was wondering if you wouldn't be happier in America."

"America?"

Jack nodded. "It's just a thought, Alex. You might be safer there . . . in every sense. Away from Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones. You could start a new life, maybe in Washington. You know I've got family there." She paused. "The funny thing is, I was going to talk to you about it before all this began."

"You want to go home?"

"I wouldn't go without you."

"I don't know, Jack. I really don't." Alex tried to imagine leaving Brookland School behind him, all his friends,

the house in Chelsea. And would MI6 leave him alone, even if he was on the other side of the world? “London’s got to be safer than it is here. Let’s go home and see how things work out.”

“Sure.” Jack smiled. “Two business-class tickets to Heathrow. We might as well travel in style—and I can always get MI6 to pay. The important thing is that we’re leaving Cairo. Are you certain you don’t want me to come with you to see Mr. Smithers?”

“No. I’ll be all right.”

“You won’t let him change your mind?”

“I don’t think he’ll even try. I’ve always had the feeling that he’s on my side.”

“Well, that sounds like a plan.” Jack lifted her glass. “So the toast is—home!”

Alex raised his own. “Home!”

The two of them clinked glasses in the setting sun.

Night comes slowly in the Sahara Desert.

By eight o’clock, the sands were burning a deep yellow and the shadows from the olive trees were stretching out as if trying to escape from the trunks that bound them. But the sun was still there, sitting on the horizon, and the heat of the day was only beginning to retreat. The salt lakes were like sheets of steel, utterly still. There didn’t seem to be a breath of wind.

The crack of the bullet tore through the great silence, splitting the very air. Seventy yards away from the tip of

the rifle, a black-and-white photograph of Alex Rider shuddered briefly, pinned to a wooden stake that had been driven into the sand. It was a perfect shot. A round hole appeared where his right eye had once been, the last in a row of five that snaked across his forehead. Lying on his stomach, Julius Grief lowered the sniper rifle—the Arctic Warfare L96A1 that had been brought to him from Cairo. It was a beautiful weapon, he thought. He couldn't wait to use it for real.

In the distance he heard soft applause. Razim was standing on the parapet of the old French fort, wearing a freshly laundered, very white dishdasha.

“Come inside, Julius,” he called out. “We’re about to turn on the night defenses and I wouldn’t want to see you being blown apart.”

Julius stood up, brushing sand off his chest and thighs. He was wearing loose-fitting shorts and a striped shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His hair had been cut a little shorter since his escape from the Gibraltar prison. He was also thickly smeared with sunscreen . . . He burned easily and it was important that his appearance remain the same.

He had been brought by ship from Gibraltar, all the way around the northern tip of Africa to the resort town of Marsa Matruh, and then driven south to Siwa. He had been at the fort for two weeks, almost exactly the same time that Alex had spent at the Cairo International College of Arts and Education. Razim had been keeping a

close watch on him. The entire world thought he was dead and it was vital that things stay that way. Of course, Julius had complained. It was as if he had been transferred from one prison to another, and in the end Razim had allowed him to visit Cairo with the promise that he would wear a baseball cap and dark glasses to conceal his identity and that he would stay well clear of Alex Rider. Razim had been furious to learn that Julius had disobeyed his instructions. So far, however, he hadn't mentioned it.

Julius passed through the main entrance and heard the whir of machinery as the solid wooden and steel gates swung shut behind him. He knew that miniature land mines, buried in the sand, would have been activated all around the fort. A few nights ago, a stray desert fox had tried to approach the compound, scavenging for food. They had all been woken up as the unfortunate animal had been blown apart.

Drinks had been served on the terrace outside the house where Razim lived. This was a neat, very square-cut building with two floors . . . In fact, it could have been drawn by a child. It had a front door and five shuttered windows, one on each side and three above, positioned with perfect symmetry. Wooden rods carved from palm trunks jutted out of the side of the house just below the tiled roof. It was part of the Berber tradition. Local tribesmen would have hung bones—animal and human—from the rods to keep away devils. But looking at the two peo-

ple who had come together to watch the sun set, they might have decided that it was already too late.

Razim had a tall glass with gin and tonic, ice, and lemon in front of him and, as usual, he was smoking one of his Black Devil cigarettes. Julius Grief sat down opposite him, resting the gun against the table. He raised a hand and one of Razim's men hurried over with a soda.

"That was excellent shooting," Razim said.

"My father trained me," Julius replied. "He trained all of us. And every time we missed, we got three strokes of the cane. By the end of it, we were all pretty good shots."

"He was a remarkable man."

"He was brilliant." Julius drank some of his soda. "You know, they say it's impossible to clone a human being. Well, he managed it. In fact he did it sixteen times."

"And the plastic surgery?"

"That was done by some doctor he found. A man named Baxter."

"It must have been very disappointing for you to find you had been given the wrong face."

"You have no idea." Julius's hand tightened on his glass. "It wasn't just that. I'd spent months learning about David and Caroline Friend. They were stinking rich . . . They owned supermarkets and art galleries and stuff. And I was going to move in as their son and take it all from them. It would all have been mine. But then Dad had to come and tell me that Alex Friend didn't actually exist. His real name was Alex Rider. And everything I'd done, everything I'd been through was for nothing!"

Razim had already noticed that when Julius became angry, he spoke with a South African accent. He was angry now.

“He was a bloody spy! I couldn’t believe it! And after that, everything went pear shaped. He managed to escape and then he killed Dad and that was the end of it.”

“I can understand how much you must hate him. But even so, you were wrong to disobey me.” Razim spoke softly, but there was an edge to his voice. “Going to the school was foolish. If you had been seen, it could have ruined everything.”

“I *was* seen!” Julius laughed. “I put on that uniform you gave me and I just walked in through the school gates. So much for all their precious security! They took one look at me and they thought I was him. I went into Gunter’s office and I waited and I saw him leave. He actually turned around.”

“He saw you?”

“No. Don’t worry. But I think he sensed me. It was quite interesting, really. It was like a sort of telepathy.”

“And how did you feel?”

“Now you’re sounding like my bloody psychiatrist, if you don’t mind my saying so, Razim. How do you think I felt? If I’d had a gun, I’d have used it then and there. I had to stop myself from running out and strangling him with my bare hands. I’d have loved to have done it. I really would.”

In the courtyard, two of the guards had appeared with shovels and a wheelbarrow, walking toward an enormous

mound of salt on the other side of the well. It was directly underneath the rope walkway. The salt had been pounded until it was fine and it seemed to Julius that it had a life of its own, shifting and swirling in the breeze. A third guard stood above, watching them.

“What are they doing?” Julius asked. The men had begun to scoop out the salt, loading it into the barrow.

“The salt has come out of the lake. We mix it with sand to make bricks.” Razim gestured at one of the half-finished buildings. “One day this will be a library. I also plan to construct a small concert hall.”

Julius sniffed. “You’d have thought it would all dissolve in the rain.”

“It has not rained here for a hundred and ten years.”

“That’s a lot of salt. Maybe we could take off all Alex’s skin and roll him in it. That would really hurt.” Julius giggled. “You are going to let me torture him, aren’t you, Razim?”

Julius had already attended several of Razim’s experiments. Only that morning they had been working on a tourist they had picked up in Alexandria. Julius had watched with fascination as Razim jotted down his findings. Unfortunately, the tourist hadn’t lived very long.

“You enjoy my experiments?” Razim asked.

“Yes. Very much. Don’t you?”

“I do not derive pleasure from them. I have never really understood pleasure. For me, they are a scientific necessity—nothing more, nothing less.”

“Well, I like them a lot.”

“And in answer to your question, I will allow you to spend a little time with Alex Rider. And I can promise you that you will cause him more pain than he has ever known. You will have your revenge, my friend. But only if you do as you are told. I will not have you putting this operation at risk again. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Julius scowled.

“Good. Scorpia has made too many mistakes in the past. I do not intend to make any myself. Alex Rider will be with us very soon, and from the moment he arrives we are going to have to take extreme care.”

Julius finished his soda. Almost immediately, and without being signaled, a servant ran forward with another.

“The gun will have to be decontaminated tonight,” Razim continued. “And make sure you don’t touch it again until it’s in place. Meanwhile, it would seem that we do have one small problem that we’re going to have to deal with.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“This morning I received a coded transmission from Zeljan Kurst in Paris. MI6 have taken one precaution that we could not have foreseen. They have sent an agent out here to keep a watch over Alex Rider while he is in Cairo. He is a very fat man by the name of Smithers.”

“Is that bad?”

“No. On the contrary. He visited Alex at his apartment the day he arrived and we have photographic evi-

dence that we can add to the Horseman file. It's further evidence that MI6 have been running a covert operation in Egypt. However, as we move toward the critical stage, I do not think we can afford to have him on the scene. It's too dangerous."

"So?"

"So this is my plan." Razim took a last drag on his cigarette, and for a moment the tip glowed the same color as the sun. "Mr. Smithers must die. I will have it done tomorrow. From what I have heard, and despite his appearance, he is an extremely effective secret agent. So I think I will send perhaps a dozen men."

"That seems a bit over-the-top."

"Learn from me, Julius. Maybe one day, when this present operation is concluded, you will join the ranks of Scorpia . . ."

"Really? Do you think they'd have me? I'd love that!"

Razim smiled. He had already decided that he was going to kill Julius as soon as he had no further use for him. That idea he had just suggested . . . flaying him alive and then rolling him in salt. That might be interesting.

"We take no risks. We make no mistakes. Tomorrow morning we kill Smithers and tomorrow evening . . ."

"Alex Rider!"

"That's when it begins . . ."



INSIDE EVERY FAT MAN . . .

THE STREET WAS JUST five minutes from the souk, but it was surprisingly quiet and empty, with just a few children kicking a soccer ball around in the dust and not a tourist in sight. The taxi dropped Alex off at a few minutes before eleven o'clock. He had already contacted Smithers using the notepad with its hidden circuitry. Smithers had rung back immediately to confirm.

The house wasn't difficult to find.

When Alex had been walking around the city with Jack, he had noticed a few old European buildings here and there . . . elegant and somehow out of place, as if the Egyptians hadn't noticed they were there and so had forgotten to knock them down. They dated back to the nineteenth century—the Suez Canal had been built at the same time—and might once have housed French noblemen or engineers. Smithers had chosen one of these and added a few touches of his own.

It was a tall, narrow building on three floors, constructed out of gray stone with dark brown shutters and a little balcony protruding over the front door. What made it almost unique in this crowded city was that it stood alone, set back from the road. A gate opened onto a path that swept up the center of a lawn that was more

dust and sand than grass. There were two stone lions facing each other about halfway up and, to one side, a tall fountain with water tinkling down in graceful loops. It was obvious that the house belonged to an Englishman. There was a large mat in front of the door with the single word: WELCOME. A small Union Jack fluttered on the roof.

Alex was already dressed for the flight home—in jeans and a dark red Hollister polo shirt. It was a little warm for the city, but Jack was packing the rest of his clothes and she had told him it was raining in London. He walked up the drive, his feet crunching on the gravel, and rang the doorbell. There was a mirror set in the wall on each side of the door and he examined the two reflections of himself as he waited. A moment later, the door opened and Smithers appeared.

“Do come in, Alex. Very good to see you. I was just boiling the kettle. I hope you’ll have a cup of tea and perhaps a slice of homemade cake?”

Smithers was more informally dressed than he had been at the apartment, wearing pale trousers and a brilliantly colored short-sleeve shirt. He could have walked straight off a cruise ship . . . All that was missing was the straw hat and the camera. He stepped back to allow Alex into a hall that was shaped like a hexagon with a marble floor, a chandelier, and rather strangely, golden-framed pictures of the royal family on each of the walls, with the queen and the Duke of Edinburgh glancing at each other, side by side, opposite the door. There was an ornate table

with what looked like a TV remote control sitting on the top. But there was no sign of a TV.

“This way!” Smithers hustled ahead into the kitchen, which was dominated by a stainless steel fridge. He threw it open to reveal shelves stacked with food, much of it flown in from England. There was a large cake on the middle shelf. “A Victoria sponge,” he explained. “Can I interest you?”

“Not really, thanks, Mr. Smithers. I’ll just have a Coke.”

“Will you stay for lunch?”

“I haven’t got time.”

“A short visit, then! Very well. Let me see . . .”

Smithers put the cake back, then carried two Cokes and a bowl of chips into the living room, an airy, old-fashioned space with plump sofas, bookshelves, and a splendid rug that must surely have come out of the souk. And yet, as Alex sat down, it occurred to him that the house told him very little about the man himself. It could have belonged to anyone. What did he actually know about Smithers, now that he thought about it? Was he married? Was he gay? Where did he live when he was in England? What did he do in his spare time, apart from cooking himself Victoria sponges? But of course, that was the world of MI6 and all its agents. They didn’t just live with secrets. Secrecy surrounded their entire lives.

Smithers helped himself to a handful of chips. “So you’ve taken my advice and decided to leave,” he said.

“Yes.” Alex hadn’t told Smithers anything. “How did you know?”

“I’m afraid I was tipped off the moment your Miss Starbright booked the flights over the Internet,” Smithers explained. “We keep a very careful watch on the movements of our agents, Alex. Half past three this afternoon. You’re right. That doesn’t leave us time for lunch.”

“I came to say good-bye.”

“That’s very decent of you.”

For some reason, Alex felt a sudden twinge of guilt. “I hope you don’t think I’m walking out on you, Mr. Smithers,” he said.

“Not at all, my dear boy. Although I do wonder if this has something to do with the explosion in Cairo yesterday afternoon? The House of Gold. There has been a great deal of excitement about that—and not just in London. I don’t suppose you were in any way involved?”

Quickly, Alex brought Smithers up to date, starting with the office break-in, the contents of Gunter’s desk, then the phone call and the events on the paddle steamer. This time, he didn’t leave anything out, and after he’d finished describing the waterboarding, Smithers pounded the table with his fist, making the rest of the chips jump.

“I like the Americans,” he exclaimed, “but sometimes they’re completely intolerable. I shall make an official complaint, Alex. They had no right to do that to you.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Smithers. I’m all right now.” Alex shrugged. “Anyway, maybe Gunter really is going to take

a shot at the secretary of state when she comes to Cairo. But as far as I can see, there's nothing going on at Cairo College. I don't have any need to be there. So I'm going home."

He took out his iPhone and laid it on the table.

"I'm afraid this got completely ruined when it went into the Nile. But you might be able to get something out of it. I took pictures of all the stuff in Gunter's desk. I still don't know why he had a picture of a coat hook there. And there was also a brochure about a place called Siwa." Alex stopped—then remembered. There was one other thing. "I managed to leave the bug behind."

"I know, Alex. I've been listening in to Mr. Gunter's office all day, but so far he hasn't said a single thing of any interest. In fact, he barely says anything at all."

"I'm sorry," Alex said. "I haven't really been very helpful to you this time."

"You shouldn't apologize." Smithers's voice had changed. He was suddenly very serious, talking in a way that Alex had never heard before. And he got the strange feeling that this new voice didn't belong to the man he had known for more than a year. It was as if he was seeing the real Smithers for the first time. "And what you just said now—about walking out on us—it's complete stuff and nonsense. I'm glad you're going. If you want the truth, I was always opposed to your getting involved in our business in the first place."

He paused, then continued more slowly.

“I never spoke my mind because it’s not my job. I do what I’m told, like everyone else. But it was wrong . . . quite wrong, getting you involved. People think that being a spy is fun and exciting. Your uncle was a bit like that. It was all a big adventure as far as he was concerned . . . and look what happened to him. The truth is that spying is dirty, dangerous work and it’s quite unfit for a child who’s still at school. I won’t deny that you’ve been useful to us, Alex. But at what cost? You were very nearly killed at Liverpool Street—that was unforgivable—and you’ve spent a whole year surrounded by death and deception. Nobody should have asked you to do that.

“So you’re absolutely right to be getting out now. I don’t know what’s happening here in Cairo, but I’ll tell you this. It’s got a very nasty smell. Leave it. Go home. And the next time Mr. Blunt or Mrs. Jones calls you, don’t pick up the phone. You should forget about us all.”

Smithers stood up. Alex knew that in his own way he had just said good-bye. Permanently. Alex got up too and the two of them shook hands.

And then the doorbell rang.

“That’s very strange,” Smithers said. “I’m not expecting any visitors.”

Alex followed him back out to the hall. Smithers snatched up the remote control that Alex had noticed earlier and pressed a button. At once, the royal family disappeared. Each gold frame contained instead a television screen with several views of the house, taken from differ-

ent angles. The garden was empty but there was a man outside wearing a FedEx uniform, carrying a small parcel.

Smithers moved over to the wall and spoke into a microphone close to the door. “What do you want?” he asked.

“I’ve got a parcel for a Mr. Derek Smithers,” the man said.

“I’m afraid I’m rather busy at the moment. Can you leave it outside?”

“I’m sorry, sir. You have to sign for it.”

“Just give me a minute.” He clicked the microphone off and turned to Alex. “I think we may be in trouble,” he said. “This is an MI6 safe house. I designed it myself. But nobody knows I’m here, certainly not any parcel delivery companies.”

“Who do you think . . . ?” Alex looked at the screen, at the man waiting outside.

“Let’s take a closer look.”

The buttons on the remote control were almost too small for his pudgy fingers, but he chose another one and pointed the device at the TV screen. The image flickered and changed. Now the man in the FedEx uniform had become a gray-and-white ghost of himself. Alex remembered the mirrored panels he had seen. That must be where the X-ray cameras were hidden. And they revealed two things. The box that the man was delivering was empty. And he was carrying a gun. The shape of the weapon, tucked into the back of his trousers, was unmistakable.

“Now that’s interesting,” Smithers muttered. “Do you think this chap followed you here? Or has he come for me?”

“Either way, I hope you’re not going to let him in,” Alex said.

Smithers smiled. “I don’t think so.” He pointed the remote at the door. “I actually put the welcome mat in myself. Occasionally, though, it becomes an unwelcome mat, as he’s about to find out.” His thumb stabbed down. The doormat collapsed. It was hinged, like a trapdoor, and the fake FedEx man had been standing right in the middle of it. With a yell, he disappeared from sight.

“What’s underneath?” Alex asked.

“It heads directly to the Cairo sewers about ten yards down,” Smithers replied. “He’ll have a soft landing, but I’m afraid it won’t be a pleasant one.”

“Mr. Smithers . . .”

Alex pointed at another of the monitors, which only moments before had been a portrait of the Prince of Wales. It showed the front gate. Two cars had pulled up, and even as he watched, half a dozen men poured out, all of them Egyptian, all of them dressed in dark clothes. Perhaps they were all in radio contact, but somehow they seemed to know what had just happened. Warily, they made their way up the garden path. Two of them had machine guns slung across their chests. The others were carrying automatic pistols.

“How many gadgets do you have in this house?” Alex asked.

“Not enough.” Smithers nodded at a third screen. Four more men had joined the others, coming around the side of the building, bringing the total to ten. They were spreading out, surrounding the house like an invading army.

“What time did we say your plane was?” Smithers asked.

“Three thirty.”

The men were getting closer.

“Then we’d better get a move on. We don’t want you to be late.”

Smithers was still holding the remote control device, and Alex wondered what else it could do. The collapsing doormat had been simple but effective, and at least it had reduced the odds by one. But there were a lot of determined-looking men crossing the front garden, approaching the front door—and as far as Alex could see, that was the only way out. The attackers were all armed and they were taking no chances, moving carefully one step at a time, as if they were in a minefield. Smithers looked from one TV screen to the next. Alex had never seen him like this before. Like so many fat men, he had always seemed carefree and jolly. But right now, as he timed his next move, he was deadly.

One of the screens showed the pair of stone lions. Two men were passing between them, each one clutching a nasty-looking snub-nosed miniature machine gun, and Alex wondered if they really dared use them here, in the middle of a city that was always on the alert against ter-

rorism. But there could be no doubting the determination in their eyes and in their very body language. They had come here for the kill. By the time the police arrived, they would be far away.

Smithers waited for the exact moment, then hit the next button. The two men partially disappeared in a cloud of white dust that sprayed out of the lions' mouths. They were still there when it cleared, gazing at each other, wondering what had just happened. Alex had no idea either. He glanced at Smithers, who said nothing. Then one of the men threw away his gun and began to roll on the grass. A second later, the other did exactly the same. They were like small children, writhing on their backs, kicking their legs, and screaming. They had completely forgotten where they were or why they had come here.

"Itching powder," Smithers muttered. "Super-strength. It was actually developed in the last war, but I've made a few improvements. To be honest with you, I've been itching to try it!"

The others had seen what had happened and looked at the two men, still rolling helplessly, in disbelief. Somebody shouted a command and they advanced on the house, colder and more angry than ever. Alex could see eight of them spread over the TV screens. He glanced at the door. Would it be strong enough to hold them back?

As if to answer the question, that was when they opened fire. Their weapons had been silenced, but even so, the sound of the bullets slamming into the walls, the

windows, and the front door was deafening. It was like being inside a tin box in a hailstorm and Alex flinched despite himself. But the door didn't so much as splinter. The windowpanes didn't crack.

"The door's armor plated!" Smithers shouted out. "And the windows are bulletproof glass. They're not going to shoot their way in."

"Can they cut their way in?" Alex asked.

"Yes. But they'd need—"

Smithers stopped. Alex had already seen it on the screens. Two of the men had run forward, both wearing body armor, their heads protected by welding masks. They carried with them an oxyacetylene torch with a cutting head capable of reaching temperatures up to 3500°C. While the others fell back, the team knelt in front of the door, and a moment later there was a burst of harsh blue flame as they fired up the torch. Almost at once, Alex smelled burning. The inside of the door began to change color as it was attacked by the fierce heat, and a moment later a tiny tongue of flame burst through and began to move, curving around the handle and the lock.

"Well, they're certainly well prepared," Smithers muttered. He sounded more irritated than afraid.

"Can you hold them off?" Alex asked.

"Unfortunately not. This is only a grade-three safe house. Now, if we were in Jerusalem or Baghdad, that would be a different matter."

Alex caught sight of a man swinging his arm. He was

halfway down the garden, captured on one of the screens. For a crazy moment, Alex thought he was playing catch . . . then he understood. It wasn't a ball. It was a grenade. It hit the roof and exploded. The whole house shook, sending the chandelier into a furious, jingling dance. Dust and broken plaster rained down and smoke billowed down the main staircase. Meanwhile, the oxy-acetylene torch was making steady progress. The hissing flame had already moved a quarter of the way around the lock.

"I think we're going to have to make a run for it," Smithers said.

"Run?" It wasn't a word that Alex would ever have associated with Smithers. A fast waddle would surely be the best he could manage. And anyway, how were they going to get out?

"There's a back way." Smithers must have known what he was thinking. "Don't you worry about me," he added. "The main thing is that you not get hurt." He searched out another button on the remote control. Outside, the fountains stopped, and even as the last drops of water splashed down, they released a cloud of yellow smoke instead. The gunmen began to stagger across the lawn, covering their eyes and coughing. "Tear gas!" Smithers explained. "Shame this isn't England or I could have had them with my exploding gnomes."

Despite the defenses, the men had almost cut through the front door. The circle of burned-out metal was nearly

complete. Smithers hurried back through the hall and into the kitchen and to Alex's astonishment headed straight for the fridge. Surely this wasn't the time for a snack! But when Smithers threw open the door, the food and the shelves had disappeared. Instead there was a stainless steel tunnel leading straight to the street. Behind them, Alex heard the front door crash open.

"After you!" Smithers cried.

Alex went first. It was a tight squeeze for Smithers, but he followed right behind and a few seconds later they were out in the street. Smithers still had the remote control. He pressed one last button and began to move away as fast as his legs would take him.

There was an explosion inside the house. Then another. Alex heard the screams of some of the men and wondered what exactly had blown up. The sofas? The toilet? With Smithers it could be anything.

It seemed to Alex that their best plan would be to disappear as quickly as possible into the crowd before reinforcements arrived—but that wasn't going to be easy. For a start, the streets were too quiet. And anyway they had already been spotted. Alex heard a van screech to a halt. The back doors were thrown open and five more men came bundling out. Alex didn't have time to see if they were armed too . . . nor did he have to look. There was a gunshot and a bullet spat into the brickwork close to his head. A few children had been playing soccer but they scattered instantly. An old man with a donkey and

cart stood trembling with wide eyes, unsure what to do. Alex could hear the sirens of approaching police cars. They must have been alerted by the first grenade. But it was impossible to tell how near they were or, given the Cairo traffic, how quickly they might arrive.

Alex and Smithers ran around a corner, past the entrance to a mosque, and down an alleyway with fresh laundry hanging on lines above their heads. It was close to midday. The sun was directly overhead and the heat was fearsome. Alex wondered how far Smithers would be able to run before his heart gave out. But he was already determined. No matter what happened, he wasn't going to leave the gadget master behind.

Smithers reached the end of the alley and came to a breathless halt, glancing left and right as he weighed up his options. "The souk!" he gasped. "We can lose them in the souk."

"Who are they?" Alex demanded.

"Scorpia," Smithers replied, and the single word told Alex everything he needed to know. Nobody else would have dared mount an armed assault in the middle of a highly populated Middle Eastern city. Nobody else was more determined to see him dead. From the very start, even when he had been attacked at Brookland, he had been aware of something unseen, some old enemy stealing out of his past. Well, now he knew. Part of him was grateful to Smithers for telling him the truth. But he was also angry. Blunt must have known that Scorpia was ac-

tive in Egypt. Yet even so, he had sent Alex here like some sort of sacrificial lamb, forcing them to make their move.

For just a brief pause, Alex and Smithers were alone. Alex guessed that the Scorpia agents had decided to regroup. They would be waiting to see if any survivors came out of the house.

“Did you tell anyone you were coming to see me?” Smithers asked.

“No. Only Jack.”

“Were you followed?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Then they didn’t know you were coming. It’s just bad luck you were with me. I’m the one that they’re after.”

A figure appeared at the top of the alleyway. Alex and Smithers set off again, crossing a courtyard of debris, past a couple of shops with interiors so dark it was impossible to see what they actually sold. The main road was in front of them, divided in half by ugly concrete pillars supporting a second road overhead. The traffic had become a solid, unmoving wall—in fact, the explosions and the approaching police must have brought the entire city to a halt. There were people streaming past in every direction. The sidewalks simply weren’t wide enough to contain them, and much of the available space was taken up by Egyptians with stalls selling sandals, cigarette lighters, scarves, souvenirs . . . each one managing to block the way ahead.

Smithers pointed. A metal footbridge led above the

chaos, up and over to the other side. Alex could feel the sweat pouring off him. The clothes he was wearing were for England. He certainly hadn't expected to run in them. He didn't look back. Somehow he had the idea that if he managed to cross to the other side he might be safe.

It wasn't the case. Halfway across the bridge, Smithers stopped to catch his breath. Alex turned and saw the five men from the van appear at the side of the road. There were two or three more behind them . . . the survivors from Smithers's safe house. He and Smithers were in plain sight—but surely even Scorpia wouldn't take them out in front of so many witnesses. He shouldn't even have framed the question. A hail of bullets hit the metal side of the bridge, and as Alex dived for cover, they ricocheted all around. Remarkably, in all the noise and the confusion, nobody seemed to hear the shots. The two of them could have been killed without anyone even noticing.

Alex caught Smithers's eye. The big man was crouching uncomfortably beside him. "Can you call for help?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not, old bean."

"You must have more gadgets!"

"Just one!" Smithers checked the way was clear, then stood up again and ran forward. Alex had no choice but to follow—across the bridge and down the other side.

Behind them, the five Scorpia agents were already clambering up the first steps, determined to follow them into the souk.

For that was where they were now. Alex had plunged into a series of courtyards and alleyways so densely packed together that it was hard to say if he was inside or out. The Khan el-Khalili souk was the biggest in Cairo, a twisting labyrinth of tiny shops connected by steps, arches, and passages, with all manner of goods piled high on shelves, dangling from walls, and spilling out onto the street. Alex and Jack had already been there and had found the experience almost too much.

“You want gold? I make you good price.”

“Please—come in, my friend. No need to buy!”

“You English? Jolly good chap!”

Every shop had its own hawker trying to draw them in. And every hawker seemed to be selling the same thing: the same earrings, rugs, spices, decorated boxes, and incense sticks that Alex had already seen in the House of Gold and that were sold by everyone else. Everything here was somehow desirable. There was nothing that anyone really needed.

And now they were back in the middle of it with at least eight armed men less than a minute behind them.

“This way!” Smithers commanded.

He had already lurched down a corridor that specialized in *sheeshas*, the slender glass pipes that many Egyptians used to smoke fruit-flavored tobacco over bubbling water. As he went, his arm or leg must have knocked into one. The result was a domino effect. Pipe after pipe toppled into the next with a terrible smashing of glass and

the outraged howls of the hawkers. Alex felt someone reach out and try to grab them. He wrenched himself free and kept going.

They passed through a soaring archway, part of a stone tower that might have housed a princess out of an ancient fable. There were thick pillars and narrow, barred windows. The archway led into a square filled with stalls and shops on all sides. The tourists were already evacuating the area. It was obvious that something was going on. They were surrounded by police cars. There were sirens howling in the air. And people were running! Nobody ever ran in the souk. The whole point of life there was to take it slowly. By the time Alex and Smithers stumbled to a halt, taking in their options, they were almost alone. Only the astonished shopkeepers gazed at them from behind half-open doors, wondering what was going to happen next.

There were three ways out of the square, but Alex saw at once that they were blocked. Yet more Scorpia men had been brought in, and this group had somehow second-guessed them. They were closing in from every direction. At least these new arrivals didn't seem to have guns. But they were carrying knives with long, vicious blades and they were ready to use them. Alex and Smithers were unarmed apart from the one gadget he had mentioned and that might be anything. What next?

"Mr. Smithers!" Alex called out the warning as one of the men raised his knife and moved in for the kill. At the

same time, Alex ducked sideways and grabbed a brass pyramid, one of thousands on sale in the souk. It made an ugly souvenir—but it was heavy, with a lethal point, and that made it a useful weapon. Alex hurled it with all his strength, watching with satisfaction as it sailed over Smithers's shoulder and hit the knife man in the center of his forehead. The man went down like a stone, dropping his knife. Smithers snatched it up, spun it in his hand, and threw it across the square. Alex looked around. A man had appeared just behind him, carrying a machine gun. The knife turned in the air, then buried itself in his chest. As the man fell back, his trigger finger tightened and suddenly he was spraying the air with bullets. About a dozen glass lamps exploded. Brass plates were blown off their hooks, falling with a great clatter. The windows of a silver shop shattered. Then it was over—but the silence after the last bullet was immediately broken by more sirens, frantic shouting, the panic of people trying to get away.

There were still two more knife men. Before he could react, Alex was seized from behind. He felt himself being dragged away and tried to struggle—but the man was too strong for him. He writhed helplessly, expecting to feel the point of the knife slide into his back at any moment. He wondered why it hadn't happened already. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other knife man close in on Smithers, who was standing in front of him, his great chest rising and falling as he caught his breath.

Alex had to break free. As he was pulled back, he passed a spice shop with sacks of powder and leaves piled up outside. He knew at once what he had to do. His hand shot out and scooped up as much brown powder as it could hold. Then he twisted around and flung it into the man's face. It was chili powder. The man screamed as it invaded his eyes and nostrils. He couldn't breathe. He was blind. Alex felt the man release him. He pulled free, then turned around and lashed out with a side kick—the *yoko geri* he had been taught at karate, his foot powering into the man's solar plexus. The man was thrown back into a counter filled with silver jewelry. He smashed through the glass, his head and shoulders disappearing. His legs twitched for a moment, then became still.

Alex wanted to rest, but he could see the last knife man closing in on Smithers on the other side of the square. The man was smiling, perfectly balanced on the balls of his feet, about to strike. Alex looked around him for another weapon. There were none—but then he noticed one of the brass plates that had been shot off its hook. He picked it up and threw it in a single movement. Unconsciously, he was back on the beach—with Tom Harris, with Sabina—playing Frisbee. The plate was heavier, but it was exactly the same shape, and its aerodynamics were more or less the same. It was a perfect throw. The plate sailed across the square, curving slightly, then crashed into the side of the knife man's neck. Alex saw his eyes go white and his legs crumple. He collapsed, leaving Alex and Smithers facing each other, alone.

Smithers seemed amused by the whole affair. “Well done, Alex,” he crowed. “I always wanted to see you in action and you really are as good as they say!”

“I think we have to get out of here, Mr. Smithers,” Alex panted. They had taken out four of the men but he knew there were plenty more.

“Quite right. It’s time I disappeared.”

“What?”

“No time to argue. It’s me they’re after. That much is obvious. Heaven knows why. Mr. Blunt will find out. The important thing is for you to get on that plane and get home.”

“But what about you?” Alex couldn’t keep a note of dismay out of his voice. Smithers would be easy to spot wherever he went. It wasn’t just his clothes. It was his bald head, his size.

“They won’t be able to find me if they don’t know what they’re looking for,” Smithers replied. He reached down between his legs. “This may come as a bit of a shock, Alex, old chap.”

For a moment, Alex thought that Smithers was about to unzip his trousers. He was certainly unzipping something. As he straightened up, there was a tearing sound and the waistband of his trousers divided into two. His shirt did the same . . . and to Alex’s horror he saw that Smithers’s bulging stomach was also splitting in half. It was like a snake shedding its skin. The brightly colored shirt and the plump, oversized arms fell aside as a second pair of arms, lean and suntanned, appeared from inside,

pushing their way out. The shoulders rolled away and finally the bald head with its round cheeks and several chins crumpled and fell back as a younger head emerged, and Alex saw what should have been obvious from the start.

A fat suit! That was Smithers's last and most brilliant gadget—and he had been wearing it from the day the two of them had met. The real Smithers was actually thin and wiry and about ten years younger—in his late thirties, with short brown hair and blue eyes. He was looking at Alex with a mischievous smile, and when he spoke again, even his public-school accent had gone. It seemed that he was actually Irish.

“I never meant to deceive you, Alex,” he explained. “I developed the Smithers disguise for work in the field, but somehow I got used to it. It was like my office suit . . . you know?” Quickly, he tucked the rubber and latex body behind one of the stalls. He was now wearing scruffy jeans and a T-shirt. For his part, Alex was too astonished to speak. “I don't feel comfortable taking it off now, if you want the truth. I feel as if I'm exposing myself. But needs must . . . if I'm going to get out of this place alive. No time to worry about it now. We'd better go different directions. Get home to Jack. Give her my best wishes. Try not to mention this if you can help it.”

And then Smithers was walking briskly away. Alex watched him climb down a flight of stairs and turn a corner, and then he was gone. He was reminded of an ad-

vertisement he had once seen in a newspaper . . . for diet pills. What had it said? “Inside every fat man there’s a thin man trying to get out.” Well, he’d just witnessed a vivid demonstration of that—although if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn’t have believed it.

He retraced his steps, putting as much distance between himself and the square as possible. Smithers might be wrong. The Scorpia people could still be looking for him. As he hurried away, a group of white-suited tourist police ran past him. The House of Gold yesterday and now this! Cairo must be wondering what had hit it. All the shops had locked their doors. Alex joined a crowd of frightened tourists and followed them as they made their way out of the souk.

Somehow he managed to find his way back to the bridge that he and Smithers had crossed. He tried to hail a cab, but he realized at once that he didn’t have a hope. They had all been taken by people wanting to get back to their hotels, and anyway the police must have set up roadblocks everywhere. Nothing was moving.

He looked at his watch. Almost half past twelve. He still had plenty of time to make the plane. Jack had given him her own mobile phone and he used it to call her at the apartment. There was no answer. That was odd. Maybe he had misdialed. Jack had definitely told him she would wait for his call. He called again and allowed the phone to ring ten times, but there was still no answer. Where was she?

Suddenly, Alex had a bad feeling. Jack wouldn't have left the apartment. She might have heard that there'd been a further disturbance in Cairo, but she wouldn't have come out looking for him. So if she wasn't answering the phone, where was she?

Alex was on his own. Smithers had gone and he had no one else to call. Pushing through the crowds in the lingering heat of the afternoon, he hurried away from the souk, following the main road back into the center of the city, searching for a taxi or a bus or anything that would give him a lift, knowing with a sense of dread that he had to get home.



CITY OF THE DEAD

ALEX FINALLY MANAGED TO FLAG down a cab in the Opera Square—an open space full of modern shops and ugly offices, cut in half by an overpass. It still took him an hour to get back to Golden Palm Heights, and half the time he found himself motionless, sweating on the back-seat, surrounded by traffic. He rang the apartment three more times. There was still no answer and he had to clamp down on his imagination, trying not to think the worst. But the fact was that if Jack had had to go out, if there had been some problem with the school or with the air tickets, she would have called him first. There was something terrible about the silence and Alex clutched the mobile until his hand was aching, hoping against hope that it would ring.

He was also worried about Smithers. It still made his head spin to think of the young Irishman who had stepped out of the fat suit. His work clothes, that was what he had said, but it must have taken a bizarre frame of mind to get rigged up like that every day. It just went to show that you couldn't trust anyone or anything that belonged to the world of espionage.

As he sat in the back of the cab, waiting for a traffic light that seemed to be stuck deliberately on red, Alex

cursed Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones—and himself for listening to them. They had set him up against Scorpia without even telling him. And Alex was absolutely certain now that whatever was going on in Egypt had nothing to do with the Cairo International College of Arts and Education. It was as if he had been lured there deliberately, part of the evil jigsaw puzzle that Scorpia was putting together. Well, to hell with all of them. Alex just wanted to find Jack. It was time to get out.

After what seemed like an eternity, the taxi turned into the compound—silent and empty now as it was still a few hours before the end of school. Alex gave the driver a handful of bills without even bothering to count them, got out of the car and ran into the apartment. The front door was open. Was that a good sign or a bad one?

“Jack!” He called out her name, standing in the middle of the living room. Despite everything, he had still hoped she would be here and he was disappointed by the silence, by the knowledge that he was alone. He could see that she had been packing. There were two suitcases open on the floor, both of them full. The few books and bits and pieces that they had brought from England were neatly stacked beside them along with some cash and their passports. There was a half-finished glass of Coke on the kitchen table. Alex examined it. The ice had melted and the liquid was lukewarm. She had been here. She had been getting ready to leave. Something or someone had disturbed her.

Then Alex saw the letter pinned to the bedroom door. A white envelope with his own name written on it. His first thought was that it wasn't Jack's handwriting. There was already a hollow pit in his stomach as he took it down and opened it. What he read made it worse.

We have Jack Starbright. If you want to see her again, come to the City of the Dead at 3:00 p.m. this afternoon. The Tomb of the Broken Moon. Do not be late. Do not speak to anyone. If you call M16, she will die. If you contact the school, she will die. If you are not alone, she will die. We are watching you now. We are listening. Obey these instructions or you will never see your friend again.

Alex felt physically sick. The marble floor seemed to be shifting beneath his feet. Three o'clock! He looked at his watch. It was already after two. They had left him hardly any time . . . presumably on purpose. Despite that, he forced himself to slow down, to think this through. The wrong decision now could kill them both.

He knew about the City of the Dead. They had actually been talking about it at school only a few days before. It was a vast cemetery in the north of the city, not far from the Citadel. The Tomb of the Broken Moon? He could find that when he got there. But should he go there at all? If he allowed himself to be captured, he would

be no use to Jack. They might simply kill him then and there. After all, this was Scorpia he was talking about, and he had given them more than enough reason.

But that didn't make sense. If they wanted him dead, that would have been easy enough to arrange. They could have had someone waiting with a gun in the apartment. They needed him for some reason—perhaps the same reason that had drawn him to Cairo in the first place. This wasn't about Cairo College. It was about him. If he walked into their trap, who could say what the consequences might be? But if he didn't, Jack would die.

He could get a message to Smithers. He still had the electronic notepad. But it wasn't worth the risk. First of all, Smithers had been forced to abandon his home and might not even have access to his computer. And anyway, Scorpia might be able to intercept the message. He could ring England. He could leave some sort of written message here. But Alex had no doubt that the apartment would be thoroughly searched. It was probably bugged even now. The note had made it perfectly clear what would happen if he tried to disobey the instructions.

It took him about fifteen seconds to run through all the options and to come to the only possible conclusion. He had to do what he was told. He had to deliver himself into Scorpia's hands and hope that some sort of opportunity would arise further down the line. The one thing he wouldn't do was put Jack's life at risk. He remembered how she had insisted on coming with him on this trip.

How he wished now that he had persuaded her to stay behind.

He was already out the door and back down the stairs—and at least there was one piece of luck. The taxi that had brought him from Cairo was still parked outside, the driver talking on his mobile phone. Alex had snatched up another handful of cash before he left, and he banged a fist on the window, showing it to the driver.

“The City of the Dead,” he instructed. “Can you take me there?”

The driver nodded.

“Do you know a place called the Tomb of the Broken Moon?”

The driver’s eyes were still fixed on the money. “I know it.”

“You can have all this if you get me there in half an hour.”

The driver must have had enough English to understand, because Alex had no sooner got in than they were away with the back tires spinning and spitting up dust. He gazed out of the window, trying to assemble his thoughts. Why did they want him to come to a cemetery? Was there something ominous about the choice? Perhaps he should try calling someone after all, using Jack’s mobile. But that was too dangerous. It was always possible that Scorpia agents were following in another car. And the iPhone itself could be bugged.

The City of the Dead, also known as the Northern

Cemetery, lay sprawled out next to the Salah Salem Highway with lanes of traffic roaring past continuously, filling the air with fumes of burned rubber and gas. It really was a city in itself, dusty and crumbling, hammered by the sun. Ever since the fourteenth century, the Egyptians had brought their dead here, building not just tombs but miniature complexes with mosques, mausoleums, and even living rooms for relatives who happened to visit. The wealthier the family, the more elaborate the complex, with high brick walls and arched doorways leading into courtyards that really could be someone's home. Indeed, a lot of the poorer people of Cairo had seen an opportunity and had actually moved in so that many of the buildings were now occupied with TV screens flickering behind windows, television antennas on the roofs, and laundry hanging on lines that stretched over the graves. There were even a few bars and supermarkets with cans and bottles spread out on wooden shelves that might once have held dead bodies.

The taxi slowed down once they entered the cemetery. It was impossible to speed through the narrow, twisting streets. The driver seemed to be looking for something and suddenly drew in, stopping beside a wooden door. Alex saw a name—TORUN—written in Arabic and English characters on a plaque. Was this the place? The driver pointed and he looked up. There was a dome and a minaret surmounted with a crescent moon that someone had shot at. The bullet had snapped off one end. The moon

was a Turkish symbol. Torun could well be a Turkish name too. Had a Turkish family moved to Cairo, died in Cairo, and decided to be buried in Cairo? At least Alex could be fairly sure that he was in the right place.

He gave the driver all his money. With his nerves tingling, he got out of the car and went through the door. He heard the taxi pull away behind him and knew that he was on his own. He looked at his watch. It was five to three. He had completed his part of the bargain. He wondered what would happen next.

Alex was surrounded by three walls. The fourth had crumbled away, revealing more tombs scattered haphazardly and a few shrubs and trees. No squatters seemed to have moved into this part of the cemetery and Alex was quite alone. He felt trapped, hemmed in on all sides. As far as he could tell, the City of the Dead stretched out for at least a mile, and at this time of the afternoon, in the full heat of the sun, there would be few tourists or visitors.

He heard footsteps. Somebody was approaching. Alex drew himself up, his whole body tensed, not sure what to expect. A figure appeared.

Alex stood where he was, completely shocked, as he watched himself walk between the graves.

It was him. The boy had his face, his hair—cut in exactly the same style. He was even dressed similarly, as if he had deliberately checked out what Alex was wearing. The only thing that was different was the cruelty in his eyes. Alex had never smiled like that, with such a degree

of malevolence. And suddenly he knew who it was . . . who it had to be.

Julius Grief stopped. "Surprised?" he asked.

Alex didn't speak. He was angry with himself. He remembered the face he had glimpsed in the window as he left school. He should have recognized him then. And the photograph he had seen in Gunter's desk. At the time it had puzzled him . . . when had it been taken? But the answer was simple. It hadn't actually been a photograph of him.

"Do you know who I am?" Grief asked.

Alex nodded. "Where's Jack?" he demanded.

"You don't ask questions," Grief replied. He was obviously relishing this. He couldn't contain his glee. "From now on, you do exactly as you're told or she gets killed. Do you understand that? We're going on a little journey together, you and me. And if you cause me any trouble, she's the one who'll pay."

"I'm not going anywhere until I've spoken to her," Alex said.

Grief's face darkened. "I don't think you understand how this works. You're nothing now, Alex Rider. You're not special. You're not a superspy. You have no idea what's coming your way. I'm in charge. I'm the one who says what you do." Suddenly, as if changing his mind, he took out a mobile, pressed the redial, and spoke a few words. "All right," he went on. "You can talk to Jack. But only if you ask me nicely. You have to say please."

“Please, may I speak to Jack?” Alex measured out the words.

“Get on your knees.”

Grief was taunting him with the phone. He was behaving like any school-yard bully. But Alex had to know if Jack was alive. He knelt down in the dust. Grief nodded, pleased with himself. He stepped forward, towering over Alex, and handed him the phone.

“Jack?” Alex muttered the single word.

“Alex—don’t do anything they say. Get help.” It was definitely Jack’s voice. But then the phone was snatched away at her end. The line went dead.

“Satisfied?” Grief held out his hand for the phone. Alex handed it back. He was already wondering how the boy had escaped from wherever MI6 had sent him. What was his part in all this? And did anyone know he was free? One thing was already certain. He was quite mad, worse even than he had been the last time they’d met, on the roof at Brookland. “From now on, you call me ‘sir,’” Grief continued. “And you speak to me only when you’re spoken to. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The telephone slammed into the side of Alex’s head, almost throwing him off his knees. He swayed and reached out to steady himself against a tomb. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Grief held all the cards. There was no point fighting with him yet.

“That’s good. Now get up and start moving. We’ve got a car waiting for us nearby.”

Grief gestured. Alex got up. The side of his head was pounding. He wondered briefly what would happen if he took Grief out here and now. It would be easy enough. Twist around, a side kick to the stomach. But they still had Jack. Until she was safe, there was nothing he could do.

They made their way back through the cemetery. Alex knew this was bad . . . worse than anything that had ever happened to him. Scorpia had its own agenda, still unknown to him. But Grief clearly had just one thing on his mind. He wanted revenge and he was going to make him suffer. Alex walked slowly, trying to ignore the pain in his head. He wouldn’t give up. His chance would come. He just had to make sure he didn’t miss it.

There was a black limousine waiting not far from where the taxi had dropped him off and, standing beside it, a man whom Alex knew. Erik Gunter was waiting, the sun reflecting off his forehead, his eyes dark and watchful. He was dressed in the same suit and tie that he wore every day at Cairo College; presumably he had left school early today to be here. The only difference was that there was a gun in his hand, but Julius nodded at him and he tucked it away, seeing that the situation was under control.

“Hello, Tanner,” he said jovially. “Or maybe I should call you by your real name now. Rider! It looks like you’ve reached the end of the line.”

“So have you,” Alex replied. “MI6 has a file on you.

You may have been a war hero in Afghanistan, but they know you've switched sides and that you're working for Scorpia. When this is over, they'll come looking for you. And they'll find you. There's nowhere in the world you'll be able to hide."

Gunter smiled, but his eyes were troubled. "Maybe I'll have to change my face," he said. "Like Julius."

Julius! So that was his name. It was the first time Alex had heard it.

Gunter glanced at the red welt on the side of Alex's head, then at the other boy. He scowled. "You weren't supposed to mark him," he said.

"He was rude to me."

"Razim won't be pleased."

Alex filed the information away. It might be useful later. Who was Razim? Presumably the man in charge. For some reason he needed Alex not just alive but unhurt. That might be helpful.

Gunter went over to the car and opened the trunk. He leaned in, and when he straightened up, he was holding a sophisticated weapon, a sniper rifle, complete with scope. Alex remembered the golf bag that he had seen at the House of Gold. He had no doubt that this weapon must have been inside. At some time Gunter had slipped a glove onto his right hand. He was holding the rifle by the barrel, taking care not to leave fingerprints.

"Before we go, I want you to take this," he said. "And don't get any funny ideas. It's not loaded."

“What do you want me to do with it?”

He had no sooner spoken the words than he felt a sharp jab in the ribs. He had been hit, hard, from behind. “You don’t ask questions. You just do as you’re told,” Julius said.

Alex took the gun. It was heavier than he had expected. He held it awkwardly, unsure what was expected.

“Aim it at me,” Gunter said. “Go on. I’m sure you’d love to kill me. Aim it at my head.”

Alex did as he was told.

“Now pull the trigger.”

Alex hesitated.

“Go on. Do it.”

Alex put his finger around the trigger and squeezed. There was a click but no explosion. As Gunter had said, the gun wasn’t loaded.

“I bet that felt good,” Gunter mocked him. “Now—hold it there.” He took out a digital camera and squeezed off a few shots: Alex and the gun, a brick wall behind him, nobody else in the picture. “That’s great,” he said. “That’ll make a nice addition to the Horseman file.” He held out the gloved hand. “Now, let’s have the gun back, please.”

Alex handed it over. He had a good idea what was going on here. He also knew that there was nothing he could do. Gunter put the rifle back in the trunk, then opened the car door. “Get in,” he instructed.

“Where are we going?”

“I’d just do what I tell you—unless you want Julius to hit you again.”

Alex climbed in. Gunter closed the door and wandered around to the driver's seat. Julius Grief sat next to him, a bundle of scowling, angry energy. Alex guessed that he was still angry at being told off.

They drove back onto the highway and about a mile out of Cairo. The sun was just beginning its downward curve by the time they turned off, following a rough track to a patch of wasteland—yet another unfinished building site. There was a large, old-fashioned helicopter waiting there with a pilot already checking the controls. The helicopter was a Sikorsky H-34, once popular with the U.S. Army but no longer in production, with an engine mounted at the nose and a cockpit big enough for a dozen men. It was much bigger than the machine that Alex had brought down over the river.

“This is as far as I come,” Gunter said. “I have to take the gun back where it belongs. But I’ll be seeing you again the day after tomorrow, Alex. Enjoy the flight! In fact, if you want some advice, you should enjoy everything while you can. You don’t have a lot of time left.”

Alex got out of the car. Julius Grief pushed him forward, his hand slamming into Alex’s back. Alex climbed into the Sikorsky. The cabin had been constructed to house an entire squadron and it was so spacious that he could almost have parked a car inside. There were straps and rigging hanging off the walls and the door slid back far enough to allow parachutists to exit cleanly. Two benches faced each other across the void. Alex wondered if Jack had sat on one of them before him.

Julius had followed him in. "Sit there." He pointed at one of the benches.

Alex did as he was told. The blades began to turn and he heard the whine of the engine rise up until it overwhelmed him. At last it was ready. The pilot pulled at the controls and the helicopter lurched off the ground. It hovered for a moment, then turned and rose up, carrying Alex away.



HELL IS WAITING

THE SCORPION WAS ABOUT an inch long, perched on the windowsill as if trying to catch the first rays of the morning sun. It was an unpleasant color, a strange sickly yellow that was almost transparent against the light. It had barely moved for the last ten minutes, its tail curving above its head. This one had to be a baby. The *Androctonus australis*—or Egyptian fat-tailed scorpion—can be more than four inches in length, and a full-grown adult is one of the deadliest insects in the world, with a sting that is often fatal.

Alex lay on his bunk, watching it. This was the second scorpion he had seen since he had woken up, climbing over the brickwork on the other side of the bars—and he guessed that there must be a nest somewhere below. Fortunately, neither of them had come any farther into the cell.

He had only a vague idea where he was—some sort of ancient fort in the Sahara desert. The sun had just been setting when they arrived, touching down on an area of sand that must have been treated in some way so that it wasn't sent spinning into the rotors. As he had climbed out, the first thing he had seen was a miniature fort, about two hundred yards away, that looked like something out

of an old film or perhaps a Tintin book. There was no other sign of life. After about a mile, the sand turned silvery gray, and he realized that he was looking at the edge of a huge lake. There was something odd about the water. It looked utterly dead.

The heat was intense, buffeting his face. He could smell aviation fuel from the helicopter. He already knew that even if he managed to escape, there would be no way out. There was simply nowhere to go. Where was Siwa? That was the name on the brochure that he had found. But if the oasis town was anywhere around him, it was out of his sight.

“Get in the jeep, Alex.” Julius Grief had climbed out of the helicopter and stood beside him. “There’s someone waiting to meet you.”

Alex said nothing but did as he was told. The jeep had been waiting beside the landing area with a driver in Bedouin dress and another man with him, carrying a rifle. Alex got in the back. Julius sat in the front. They started up and drove the short distance to an arched entranceway and two massive gates. As they passed into the fort, the gates swung shut behind them, meeting with a solid and conclusive thud.

And now there was activity all around him. As the jeep slowed down, Alex took it all in: Arab guards with machine guns, a radio tower, satellite dishes, more jeeps, watchtowers, and spotlights. There was a man drawing water from the well, another digging at some sort of salt

pile. Overhead, a rope and wooden walkway stretched from one side to the other. He counted about a dozen buildings of different sizes, including one that looked like a chapel and one that was more like a doll's house.

There was no sign of Jack.

"This way," Julius said.

Alex followed his doppelganger into a long, narrow building set right next to one of the walls. He found himself in a cool, empty space with a fan turning in the ceiling and a wooden floor. There was a desk and a chair with a Cairo College uniform neatly folded and hanging on the back. Two guards, silent and emotionless, stood waiting for him.

There was a movement at the door and another man strolled in. Before the man had even spoken, Alex felt the atmosphere in the room change. He turned and found himself facing a short, very slender man with close-cropped gray hair and round glasses. The man looked too small and girlish to be dangerous, but Alex knew he must be in charge.

He stopped in front of Alex and examined him.

"What happened to his face?" he demanded.

"I hit him," Julius replied.

"That's very displeasing, Julius. I specifically asked you not to do that."

"He annoyed me."

The man turned to Alex. "Welcome to Siwa," he said. "My name is Razim, and I've been looking forward very

much to meeting you. I have to say, you do have a remarkable similarity to Julius Grief, a credit to the artistry of modern plastic surgery. I hope you didn't find the journey too stressful."

"Where is Jack?" Alex demanded.

"She's here. She's unhurt—for the time being."

"I want to see her."

"I'm sure you do, but I'm afraid that won't be possible. As a matter of fact, I'm afraid you have a rather distasteful experience ahead of you. Believe me when I say that I take no pleasure in it, but I'm aware that in the past you have been equipped with certain ingenious gadgets and I also know that your Mr. Smithers has been in Cairo. So I'm afraid you'll have to be stripped and searched from head to foot. I won't actually witness this myself. I'll spare your blushes. But I would advise you to cooperate with my guards or they will hurt you quite considerably.

"After that, you will take a shower and all your clothes will be replaced. We have a school uniform for you there, on the chair. We don't want any exploding buttons or anything like that. As you can see, Alex, I am not a man who makes mistakes. You are now in my power and will remain so until the end of your life."

"That's not a very long time," Julius muttered.

"That is indeed the case." Razim sounded almost sad. "But we can discuss that in the morning. After the guards have finished with you, they'll take you to a cell. You

might be interested to know that we are in an eighteenth-century French fort, and this used to be the prison block. You will be given dinner and then left to sleep. I advise you to take advantage of it. You'll need all the rest you can get."

Julius smirked. Razim nodded at the guards, who moved forward.

"Good night, Alex. We will meet again tomorrow."

"Sleep well!" Julius crowed.

The two of them left together and then the guards began their work. Two hours later, Alex found himself back in school uniform, alone in a cell that measured about thirty feet square with a bunk, a table, and a bucket for him to use in the night. There was a single barred window that looked onto the outer wall with a long shadow stretching out in the corridor in between. After about twenty minutes, the door opened and another guard came in with a tray holding bread, soup, and a bottle of water. This was all he was going to get for the night.

But there was no point in starving himself. Alex ate the food and drank half the water. He curled up on the bunk and a short while later, despite everything, he was asleep.

And now it was the morning, and the scorpion, alarmed by something, suddenly scuttled forward and disappeared over the windowsill. Alex looked up at the sun. He guessed it must be around eight o'clock. A moment later the guard who had brought Alex's dinner returned, dressed

in baggy trousers with a scarf around his head. There was a machine gun slung across his back. He signaled with one hand. The message was clear: Come with me.

Alex was led back out of the cell and down the passageway to the area where he had been received the night before. As he went, he heard a familiar voice.

“Take your hands off me, you creep. Who do you think you are, anyway? Just because you’ve got a gun—”

Jack! Alex hurried forward and there she was, standing in front of the desk, poking her finger into the chest of a man who was twice her size. She was dressed in the clothes she must have been planning to wear for the flight—pale jeans and a shirt tied around her waist. Her hair was a bit bedraggled and there was a tiredness in her eyes, but otherwise she looked fine.

Ignoring the guard who was right behind him, Alex ran to her.

“Alex!”

The two of them embraced. They were surrounded by armed men, but for the moment all of them were forgotten.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked.

“I’m fine. But I told you. You shouldn’t have come.”

“I didn’t have any choice, Jack. I couldn’t just leave you.”

“I know.” She held him close. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “I think I’ve found a way out of here.” Then, louder: “Who are these people, Alex? What is this place?”

“I don’t know,” Alex replied. “But I think we’re going to find out.”

“Come. Now.” One of the guards had managed two words of English. He pointed at the door. Alex and Jack were led out of the prison block.

It was early morning, but the sun was already hot. Alex and Jack were led past the main gate and across to the house where Razim lived. Alex looked around him. He had already counted a dozen guards and there were probably more. This was the home of someone who liked to feel extremely secure. Ahead of them, Razim was waiting for them on a small terrace that he had constructed in front of his home. There was a stone table surrounded by dwarf palms sprouting out of terra-cotta pots. A stone lion dribbled water into a basin, the tinkling sound giving an illusion of cool in the desert heat. As usual, he was wearing a white dishdasha that looked brand-new. He was eating breakfast: fresh figs, yogurt, pastries, and tea. There was also a pack of cigarettes—Black Devils—beside him. Alex was glad to see that the table was set for three. It seemed that Julius Grief wouldn’t be joining them.

Seeing them, Razim got to his feet. “Please join me. I hope you don’t mind my starting without you. I never sleep after five o’clock and I’m always rather hungry by the time it comes to breakfast. However, there’s plenty left. Do sit down.”

Jack glanced at Alex as if for advice. Alex nodded and they took their places.

Razim seemed pleased. He fussed over them, moving dishes and pouring the tea as if they were guests who had chanced to pop in rather than his prisoners. Meanwhile, Alex looked around him. It was already obvious that it would be almost impossible to escape from the fort, and yet, at the same time, he remembered what Jack had just said. *"I think I've found a way out . . ."* She'd been here a little longer than he had. Could she possibly have seen something that he'd missed?

"Will you have some tea, Alex?" Razim held out the pot.

"Thank you." Alex hated the fake politeness, the pretense that all this was civilized. He'd been here before. Tea in the garden with Damian Cray. Dinner with Julia Rothman. All these people had to pretend that they were human. To disguise the fact that they were anything but.

But Jack wasn't having any of it. "What do you want with us?" she demanded. "Alex ought to be at school. You've got no right to bring him here."

Razim set down the pot and helped himself to a spoonful of yogurt. "Let's not keep up the pretense that Alex is an ordinary schoolboy, Miss Starbright," he said. "We all know who he is and what he is. And for that matter, you really shouldn't speak to me as if I am an ordinary man. Of course I have no right to keep you prisoners here. But I am a criminal. Why not let us be honest about it? The law means nothing to me. I do exactly what I want."

“What *do* you want?”

“You’re very direct! Please have some breakfast. You both need to eat and—particularly in this heat—to drink.”

Alex took some fruit. Jack hesitated, then did the same. A man walked past them pushing a wheelbarrow piled high with salt crystals. Whatever work went on here, it never stopped.

Razim licked his spoon clean. “That’s better,” he began. “I’m sure the two of you have a lot of questions, so let me put your minds at rest by answering at least a few of them.”

“You don’t need to tell us anything,” Alex interrupted. “I already know that you’re part of Scorpia and that you’re planning to assassinate the American secretary of state when she gives her talk in Cairo this weekend. I also know where we are. We’re close to the town of Siwa.” At least some of this was guesswork, but Alex was pleased to see a flicker of surprise behind the two circles of glass. Razim had been thrown and couldn’t conceal it. “I know this,” he went on, “and MI6 knows it too. By now they’ll have realized that Jack and I are missing and they’ll come looking for us. If you let us go now, you might have time to save yourself. But otherwise I’d say you’re pretty much finished.”

There was a long silence. Then Razim broke into a forced, unnatural laugh. “Well spoken, Alex,” he said. “My friends at Scorpia told me you were someone to be

reckoned with and they were certainly right. I am willing to accept that you have managed to work out at least part of what we are planning. You have seen the rifle. It is common knowledge that the secretary of state will be here tomorrow. But it is already too late to prevent us, and I can assure you that you have no idea at all of our true aims.

“As to the arrival of MI6, which I am inclined to doubt, they may find it more difficult than you think to reach us. This fort was built more than two hundred years ago, but I have made certain modifications. We are in the middle of a minefield. There is what you might call a necklace of roadside devices, similar to those used in Afghanistan, around the compound. We can activate them the moment we come under attack . . . There’s a series of switches in the control room.” He gestured at the old bake house with its brick chimney. “You might also like to know that the towers here are equipped with radar warning and electronic warfare antennae. We have enough firepower here to blast an entire fleet of aircraft out of the sky. The Iranians kindly provided us with several of their SA2 medium-range, high-altitude surface-to-air missiles. At a price, of course. But I am a man who likes to feel safe, and were any enemy forces to show themselves—in the air or on land—I can assure you that it would be a simple matter to blow them to smithereens.”

He smiled and laid down his spoon, lining it up exactly with his plate.

“But even if by some miracle MI6 did manage to find us and break in, they would still be too late,” he continued. “I am leaving Egypt tomorrow night. I have another identity and another life waiting for me in another part of the world. And as for you, Alex . . . well, that was what I wanted to talk to you about. That’s why I invited you to join me.”

He paused. Alex glanced at Jack, willing her to stay quiet, not to endanger herself. He knew she wasn’t going to like what they were about to hear.

“I will make no secret of the fact that you have been a considerable nuisance to my colleagues in Scorpia,” he began. “Indeed, one of the things that attracted them to this operation was that you were going to be at the center of it. Speaking personally, I have no interest in revenge. And I want you to understand that I have no particular feelings about you. You seem a pleasant enough boy. But unfortunately for you, you are now completely in my power and, as it happens, I am a scientist. Recently, I have been doing a great deal of research into the subject of pain. This evening, when the sun sets, I intend to perform an experiment on you. In effect, my aim is to cause you more pain than you have ever known, more pain than you can begin to imagine.”

“You’re mad . . . ,” Jack whispered.

Razim ignored her. “It’s strange, but imagining pain actually makes it worse when it finally arrives. This is something I have discovered through my research. I no-

tice that you are clutching a fruit knife, Miss Starbright, and perhaps plan to attack me with it. I can assure you that one of my guards will shoot you down before you can even rise out of your chair.”

Jack’s hand had indeed closed around one of the knives. She was hardly breathing and her eyes were pinpricks of fury. Alex reached out and touched her arm. She put the knife down.

“Thank you. Now, where was I? Yes. It’s a bit like entering a swimming pool. The child who imagines the cold water, who enters it one inch at a time, has a much worse experience than the child who simply runs off the diving board and jumps in. The dread that one feels before visiting the dentist is often as unpleasant as the visit itself. That is why I’m telling you this now, Alex. I want you to start thinking about what lies in store for you tonight. You see that building over there?” He pointed to what looked like a chapel on the far side of the compound. “That is where you will be taken. That is where, for you, hell is waiting.”

“You can’t do this,” Jack said. “You’re a monster! Alex is a fifteen-year-old boy!”

“It is because he is fifteen that he is so useful to me. And please don’t bore me with this stupid name-calling. I have already made it quite clear to you that Alex Rider is nothing to me. I am not like Julius, for example, who hates him very much indeed, who is indeed consumed by hatred. I have no such emotions. For me, hate is as much

a waste of time as love. Alex has been a useful device in a plan that I have created for Scorpia. Tonight, he will be useful to me. That is all. I simply want the two of you to prepare.”

Razim pulled the cigarette pack toward him and opened it. There was one cigarette left. He took it out and lit it. “You have the rest of the day to yourselves,” he said. “You are free to walk in the desert . . . The salt lakes have a certain beauty, and you may like to swim. I can lend you both bathing suits. Do not take this as a sign of weakness on my part. You have no drinking water and it would be quite impossible for you to walk the ten miles to the village of Siwa in the full heat of the day. And anyway, you will be watched at all times. As you may have appreciated when you were brought here, Alex, I have reasons for not wanting to damage you. But if you stray too far from the fort, if you attempt to do anything that gives me reason to believe that you are trying to escape, I will not hesitate to put a bullet into your friend. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you completely,” Alex said. There was contempt in his voice.

“Good.” He stood up. “I have a few last-minute preparations to take care of, but please feel free to have as much breakfast as you want. Lunch will be served here as well. The guards will take you back to your cells at four o’clock—you’ll need to get as much rest as you can before your experience tonight. I hope you both enjoy what time is left to you.”

Razim got up and left. Jack waited until he had gone into the house.

“Oh, Alex . . . ,” she began. The words came out almost as a sob.

“Let’s not talk here,” Alex said. “We might be overheard.” He looked briefly at the archway and the open door that led out of the compound. It was still hard to believe that Razim was just letting them walk out. But then again, they were in the middle of the Sahara—a perfect prison even if it didn’t have any walls. “He said we could go for a swim, so let’s do that. No one will be able to hear us in the middle of a lake.”

In the end, they didn’t swim. Two of the guards had followed them and stood watching, twenty paces away. Instead, they walked along the shoreline of one of the extraordinary lakes that had somehow sprung up in the middle of the desert, with so much salt in the water that strange crystal formations were spreading out across the sand. The fort was about a quarter of a mile away and reminded Alex of something he might have built when he was six or seven years old.

They had both heard what Razim had said. Neither of them knew quite what to say. Alex knew that Razim had done this on purpose. He might pretend to be a scientist. He might claim to have no feelings. But deep down, he was getting some foul pleasure from their pain.

It was Jack who broke the silence. “What a bastard! What a little jerk! I won’t let him hurt you, Alex. I swear

to God . . .” Suddenly there were tears in her eyes and this time she didn’t try to wipe them away. “I never had any idea,” she went on. “When you went away on all those adventures, I knew it was bad, but I never thought it was like this. How could we have let this happen to you all this time? And your uncle actually wanted you to be a spy? They’re all as bad as each other . . . Alan Blunt, Mrs. Jones . . . even Mr. Smithers. They should never have allowed it to happen.”

Alex put an arm around her. “Don’t worry, Jack,” he said. “I’ll get away.” He forced a smile. “I always do.”

Jack nodded and used the backs of her hands to wipe her eyes. “If we could steal one of the cars . . .”

“I can’t drive,” Alex reminded her.

“No. But I can.” Her face brightened a little. “There is just one thing, Alex.” She looked around, checking that the guards were far enough away. “Before you arrived, I was alone in my cell for a time, and there was something I noticed. The walls are brick, but the cement is some sort of mixture of salt and mud. And one of the bars of my window is a little loose.”

“Can you get it out?”

“I might be able to. Look!” Carefully, she lifted her shirt to show Alex that there was a knife tucked into her waistband. “I stole it at the end of breakfast, after that creep had left. I can use it to cut into the brick. It’s very soft. And if I can get the bar out, I can squeeze through.”

“And then?” Alex felt the first stirrings of hope.

“Somehow I get you out of your cell and off we go. When they flew me here, we passed over Siwa. I actually saw it, and it can’t be more than about ten minutes away by car. If we can get there and raise the alarm . . . We just have to make one phone call. And that’ll be the end of Ratface—or whatever he calls himself. He won’t have time to come after us. He’ll have to get out fast.”

“What about the car keys?” Alex asked.

“I noticed that too. They leave them in the cars.” Jack smiled. “You see—they’re not as smart as they think they are.”

Alex thought about what Jack had just said. Everything made sense, and yet at the same time, something worried him. Three basic errors. The crumbling metal, the car keys, the knife that had gone missing without anyone noticing. It seemed almost too good to be true. On the other hand, Jack could be right. Razim thought he had all the odds on his side. That could be making him careless.

“All right,” Alex said. “But listen to me, Jack. If you get a chance to leave without me, that’s what you have to do.”

“I’d never leave you behind,” Jack said.

“You might have to. If it’s a choice between one of us or neither of us, you’re going to have to go.” He reached out and held her hand. “And please watch out for yourself, Jack. I’ve met people like these before, and I’m telling you, they know what they’re doing. This is Scorpia we’re talking about.”

“You’ve beaten them twice,” Jack reminded him.

Alex nodded. “Let’s hope it’s third time lucky.”

• • •

They spent the rest of the day together, sitting in the shade, talking about anything that would take their minds off the clock ticking away, the evening drawing in. Alex tried to forget what Razim had said.

“ . . . more pain than you have ever known . . . ”

They talked about Brookland, about Sabina, about the apartment in Chelsea . . . about anything that would fill the silence. There was no sign of Julius Grief, and Razim seemed to have disappeared too. Maybe they were both inside. The sun was blazing down and there was barely any breeze. But slowly the light changed. The temperature began to cool. At half past three a guard appeared and, in broken English, told them that it was time to go back to their cells. Neither of them wanted to show any emotion in front of these people, so they embraced briefly.

“Good luck,” Alex whispered.

“I’ll come for you. I promise . . .”

They were led their separate ways.

Alex was taken to his cell. Jack’s was farther down the corridor, on the opposite side. Before the doors were locked, Alex was able to look around him, and he saw, with a heavy heart, that Razim was being true to his word. He was taking no chances. A wooden chair had been placed in the middle of the corridor and there was already another guard sitting there. If he heard the slightest sound, he would raise the alarm.

The two doors slammed shut. The keys were turned.

Time slowed down. Alex felt every minute as it lum-

bered past. He knew that all this was part of Razim's plan. He wanted him to think about what lay ahead, and Alex tried as best he could to put it out of his mind.

“. . . more pain than you can begin to imagine . . .”

But of course he couldn't. What were they going to do to him? Alex remembered the scorpions that he had seen that morning. Maybe that was their plan. No. Stop. Don't even think of it. Don't let your imagination do their work for them.

All too quickly, the sun began to set. Why couldn't it hover in the sky a little longer? Why was it suddenly so eager for the end of day?

Darkness fell. The door swung open and Julius Grief was there.

He had also changed into a Cairo College uniform as if determined to mimic Alex to the bitter end. "It's time!" he crowed. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to this!"

There were two guards with him, both of them armed. Alex stood up. He had no choice. He stepped out into the corridor. There was no sign of Jack.

With Julius Grief striding ahead, the three of them led him out.



HELL IS HERE

ALEX COULDN'T MOVE.

He was sitting in a high-backed leather chair, strapped in place by soft cords around his wrists, his ankles, and his neck. No matter how much he struggled, they would make no mark. A series of wires ran down his naked chest. Each one had been carefully positioned and stuck in place by an unsmiling female technician in a white coat; she was the only woman Alex had seen since he had arrived at the fort. There were more wires attached to two of his fingers, his pulse, his forehead, and the side of his neck.

The air-conditioning had been turned up high and Alex could feel his own sweat chilling against his skin. With its thick, white-painted walls curving around him, the room reminded him of an oversized igloo. He was connected to a variety of machines that were already measuring everything that was happening inside him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a green dot pulsing across a screen, and he knew it was recording his heartbeat. The dot was moving very fast. He tried willing it to slow down, but he was no longer in control. Alex hated the way that he had been reduced to nothing more than a laboratory specimen, but there had been nothing

he could do. They had finished by wheeling a large TV screen in front of him, and he had wondered what it was for. Was Razim going to show him some sort of horror film? Nothing could be worse than the horror that was all around him. For the moment, the television was turned off. The technician and the guards had withdrawn, leaving him alone.

Alex waited to see what would happen next. He thought about Jack. Even now there was a part of him that was more scared for her than for himself. He had been in situations like this before. A lot of unpleasant people had threatened him with a lot of unpleasant things, but somehow he had always come through. But this was all new to her. While he sat here, she would be putting her plan into operation, trying to escape. He just hoped she would take care. She had no idea what she was up against.

Footsteps on the concrete floor. Julius Grief had returned, this time in the company of Razim. The boy's face was flushed with excitement and anticipation, and it made Alex's stomach churn to see this grotesque version of himself capering toward him. Razim had changed into a pale gray collarless jacket and trousers that made him look like an upmarket dentist. He was wearing an ear-piece with a wire snaking down behind his shoulder. As he stopped in front of the chair, the spotlights reflected in his spectacles and his eyes briefly disappeared behind two blazing circles of white.

“Are you afraid, Alex?” he asked.

Alex didn’t answer. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“Would you like a glass of water before we begin?”

Still, Alex said nothing.

“A great many people have sat where you are sitting now,” Razim went on. “I have conducted many experiments in this room, and one day the world will be grateful for the information I have gathered. It is very unusual for me to have a teenager, and in normal circumstances it would suggest to me many possibilities.”

He reached out. He was standing next to a trolley covered with a sheet, and he uncovered it to reveal a long line of knives and scalpels, neatly laid out. Alex knew that he was doing it purposefully for effect. It was the act of a bad stage magician in a cheap theater. He tried not to look at the gleaming instruments. He already knew that he couldn’t break free. All he could do was sit and wait.

“As you can see, there are all sorts of ways that I could cause you pain, Alex,” Razim murmured. “My young friend Julius has ideas of his own. Left to himself, he would, I am sure, do unspeakable things to you, starting perhaps with your toes and working up. He would have enjoyed that very much. Unfortunately, I cannot allow him to go ahead. We are both somewhat limited, for reasons that I won’t go into at the moment. You cannot be marked in any way. No cuts or bruises! No bits missing! And so, with regret, we must say farewell to the knives and the syringes. There will be no bloodshed tonight.”

He covered the trolley and pushed it away.

“However, do not believe for a minute that this offers you some sort of easy way out. I have made it my life’s work to study pain in all its different forms, and the pain that I intend to inflict on you will be perhaps even worse. There are two instruments that I am going to use. Earlier today, I promised you hell. And now, my dear child, it is here.”

He reached down and took hold of two plastic boxes. Alex recognized one immediately. It was a remote control, presumably for the television screen in front of him. The other was similar, about the size of a mobile phone, with a single red button mounted in the center. Razim handed this to Julius, who took it gratefully, licking his lips and rolling it in his palm.

Razim tapped his earpiece as if awaiting instructions. “Are you ready, Alex?” he asked. “There’s something I want you to see.”

He turned on the TV.

Jack had begun working on the bar the moment she had heard Alex being taken from his cell. As the footsteps faded into the distance, she felt a black steel mesh of shock and disbelief slamming down in her mind. Jack had always thought the best of people. She had refused to believe that anyone could be completely heartless and evil. Her breakfast with Razim had proved her wrong.

She had seen the guard sitting outside in the corridor

and had no idea if he was still there. She hoped that Razim wouldn't have considered her important enough to watch over while he dealt with Alex. Even so, she would have to work quietly. And quickly. What were they going to do to him? How soon would they start? Jack felt the tears rising and angrily wiped them away. Crying wasn't going to help Alex. She had to get out of here.

The window looked out onto a strip of sand and rubble with another building, possibly a storehouse, directly opposite. There were just two vertical bars, solid steel, set side by side, as if in a cartoon. She had to remove only one of them and she would have enough space to squeeze out. And one of them, as she had discovered, was loose.

The fruit knife that she had stolen from the breakfast table was small, with a blunt edge. Even if she had been able to use it to attack Razim, it was unlikely that she would have been able to do him much harm. But it was surprisingly effective against the crumbling brickwork that surrounded the bar. She was using it like a chisel, chipping away, making sure that the rubble fell into the cell where nobody could see it. The cement was very soft, almost like putty. And maybe it had rained—did it ever rain in the desert?—because it was damp to the touch. The bar was already wobbling. Soon she would be able to pull it free.

But how soon? Alex had been gone for about ten minutes and she dreaded to think what they might be doing to him. It was worse than that. She had to use all her

mental strength not to think about Alex, to put him out of her mind. Otherwise, she would be too sick to continue. She was his only hope. She was going to break out and bring help. She had come all the way to Egypt to look after him and she wasn't going to let him down.

She had scooped out a lot of the cement, forming a cavity around the bar. She pulled and it came free. It happened so suddenly that she actually dropped it, trying to grab it with fumbling fingers and only half catching it as, with a dull clang, it hit the floor. She froze, terrified that the sound of metal hitting concrete would alert the guard if he was still sitting outside. She waited a minute, her heart pounding. Nobody came. The door didn't open.

She pulled herself up and stuck her head out of the gap she had made.

The cell block was in one corner of the fort—on the side opposite of Razim's house. Leaning out, Jack could just glimpse the main courtyard with the salt pile that the guards had collected. The sun was setting and the sky had gone that strange color unique to the desert, something between blue and mauve and washed-out over the horizon as if recovering from the heat of the day. There was nobody in sight.

Jack was about to heave herself up, then had second thoughts and grabbed the metal bar and looped it through her belt. It was the only weapon she had and she might need it. Getting out of the cell wasn't going to be easy. The bunk was in the wrong place and screwed down to

the floor. There was no chair. She had to hoist herself up, using the muscles in her arms, and then pull her head and shoulders through the narrow space between the remaining bar and the edge of the window.

Somehow she managed to maneuver herself so that she was dangling half outside, and she twisted around, wincing as the loose metal bar dug into her stomach. For a moment she thought she was stuck. Her hips were the widest part of her body and they refused to pass through. She was almost prepared for the humiliation of being discovered and dragged back inside. If anyone walked around the back of the storehouse, they would be certain to see her. The thought gave her extra strength. One final squeeze and she had made it, falling in a tangle of arms and legs to the ground below.

She landed heavily, winding herself. There were marks all the way down the side of her body where she had positioned the bar. For about five seconds she didn't move. Surely someone would have heard her. She had made so much noise! But perhaps the guards were at dinner. Perhaps they were helping to deal with Alex. *Alex . . . what are they doing to you? I can't wait. I have to get help.* Nobody came. Jack picked up the bar and got to her feet. Now all she had to do was steal a car and drive away.

The main courtyard was about fifteen paces away, on her right, and this is where she headed, following the wall of the storehouse. It seemed to her that the shadows were darker on the other side, away from the prison block. The

courtyard was where the cars were kept parked. She had seen them earlier. About halfway along, she came to an open doorway with a pile of crates and boxes stacked up around it. There were lights on inside—it was already night—and she peered in nervously. It was a kitchen. There was a fridge, a microwave oven, some cupboards, a table, and chairs. Maybe this was where the guards came to eat and relax when they were off duty. But there was nobody there now.

She continued to the end, crouching low in case one of the guards was positioned on the rope bridge that stretched high up from wall to wall. The whole fort seemed to be abandoned. Her pulse raced. There was a car, a very old and beaten-up Land Rover, parked right in front of her. Incredibly, she could even see the keys in the ignition. Surely it couldn't be as easy as this!

It wasn't. A young, bearded guard was standing right next to it, leaning on the hood, smoking a cigarette. There was a rifle slung over his shoulder. To get the car, she would have to get past him. Or she could knock him out with the bar. But she would never be able to sneak up on him without being heard. Sound carried too easily in the desert evening, particularly when surrounded by the great silence of the sands. Somehow she had to distract him. She had to make him come to her.

And quickly. They're hurting Alex. They've already started.

She remembered the kitchen. It was just a few steps

back and she darted in. She threw open the fridge and, with a surge of relief, found what she was looking for: a carton of eggs. Why should she have remembered this now? It was the sight of the microwave that had done it. A failed experiment by a ten-year-old Alex Rider. How she had yelled at him at the time! But now she could use it.

She put one of the eggs into the microwave, swiveled the knob to five minutes and turned it on. Then she hurried back outside and hid behind the boxes. She wondered if it would have been sensible to have armed herself with a kitchen knife, but the idea revolted her, and anyway, she hadn't seen one around. She waited, counting the seconds. She could imagine the egg turning slowly behind the glass door on its rotating plate. As Alex had discovered, you can't cook an egg that way. There was a bang as the egg exploded, showering itself all over the inside of the microwave.

As she had hoped, the guard had heard the noise and came running almost immediately. He stopped at the entrance to the kitchen and looked inside, wondering what had happened. That was when Jack tiptoed forward and hit him on the back of the head with the iron bar, using all her strength. The man grunted and fell sideways. Jack made sure he was really unconscious, then turned and ran for the car.

All sorts of thoughts were going through her mind. Should she have taken the guard's rifle? Could she make

her way through the fort, find Alex, and take him out with her? No—that would be too dangerous. Right now, she had the element of surprise, but the moment she tried to start a fight, Razim would outnumber her by a factor of about twenty to one. She hated leaving Alex behind, but she remembered what he had said beside the lake. Better one of them out than neither of them. The town of Siwa couldn't be too far away. She would get there and come back with reinforcements . . . the local police, the army, whatever. And the moment Razim heard the car leaving, as soon as he had found out what had happened, he would stop whatever he was doing and come after her. Alex would be all right.

She got into the car, closing the door softly behind her so that it made no sound. There was nobody guarding the gate. It was open with the desert and a single track stretching out beyond. This was somehow all too good to be true. Would the car start? She turned the key and the engine purred into life. Nobody shouted at her. Nobody came running.

What about the mines? Razim had said there was a defensive circle all the way around the fort. But she remembered his words. They were turned on only if he believed he was under attack. She would just have to hope for the best. There might be other tire tracks she could follow through the sand.

Hang on, Alex. Help is on its way.

She pushed the car into first gear and moved off.

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It took the television screen several seconds to warm up. Alex found himself looking at a black-and-white image that was so fuzzy, it could have been shot at night. At first he didn't understand what he was seeing. Julius Grief was leering at him, waiting for him to work it out. Razim was standing to one side, resting the remote control in his palm. Alex thought of closing his eyes, of looking away. Whatever these two freaks were trying to show him, it couldn't be good. But then he realized what was happening and knew that he was trapped, that it was already too late.

There must have been a camera hidden somewhere high up in Jack's cell. Jack had her back to him, but he could see her attacking the bar of the window with the knife she had taken, cutting into the brickwork. Alex still didn't know why they were doing this, what they wanted. But as he watched her, Razim began a soft, mocking commentary.

"So it would seem that your friend Miss Starbright stole a knife from the breakfast table this morning. That was very bad of her. But shall I tell you a little secret, Alex? I had an idea that she might. In fact, I rather wanted her to. And she didn't disappoint me."

On the screen, Alex saw the bar fall out of the window.

"And there you are," Razim continued. "Who would have thought that someone as careful as myself would put your friend in a cell with a metal bar just waiting to come

loose? And how foolish of me to dismiss the guards who usually patrol the prison block, leaving her free to wriggle out. What could I have been thinking of?"

Alex was beginning to see where this was going. All around him, the machines pulsed and flickered and the needles began to twitch. Julius Grief was grinning, still clutching the black plastic box that Razim had given him.

"Now look at that! She's out! She's free. And despite all the noise she's made, nobody has heard. I wonder if anyone has left a car for her, to help her get away?"

There were other cameras outside. Alex saw Jack look into the kitchen, then continue down the passageway where a third camera picked up the main courtyard with the waiting Land Rover.

"Just one guard," Razim crooned. "We didn't want to make this too easy, did we!"

"You wanted this to happen." Alex wasn't sure how he found the words. There was a terrible crushing feeling in his chest, as if he was being scooped hollow.

"Of course. We were using a long-range listening device when you were at the lake this morning. Why else do you think I let the two of you walk alone? It might amuse you to know that the technology was almost exactly the same as that water-bottle gadget you were given by Mr. Smithers. Yes, I know about that too." Razim moved closer, so close that when he spoke again, Alex could feel his breath on his cheek. "Have you not yet learned? I am a master of manipulation. I manipulated MI6 into send-

ing you here. I manipulated your arrival at the Cairo International College of Arts and Education. And very soon I will be manipulating the British government to do exactly what I demand. From the start, I have been pushing the buttons and pulling the strings. All along, you have been dancing to my tune.”

Razim nodded at the screen. Alex watched Jack come out of her hiding place and knock out the guard.

Julius giggled. “She thinks she’s being so clever!” he exclaimed.

“I must say, I hadn’t expected her to injure my guard,” Razim said. “But as to the rest of it . . . shall we tell Alex?”

“Yes!” Grief’s eyes were dancing. “Tell him!”

“There are two types of pain, Alex. Physical and emotional. Up until now, my experiments have all been physical. But as I have already told you, I need you intact. So it is emotional pain that I am measuring right now and, I have to say, the results are already impressive.”

The needles were jumping and swaying like grass in the wind. Pulses of light were shooting across the screens. Alex’s entire body was tense, his hands straining at the bonds, his eyes staring. He knew what was coming. He had worked it out.

“Please,” he pleaded. “She has nothing to do with this. You don’t have to hurt her.”

Jack had gotten into the car.

“Oh, but I’m afraid I do,” Razim said. “Miss Starbright is now sitting on thirty pounds of high explosive,”

Razim said. “Consider the situation, Alex. She has been with you all your life. She has sacrificed so much for your happiness. She is, I am sure you would agree, your best friend.”

“Leave her!” The machines had gone mad. Alex was writhing, trying to break free.

“She is your best friend. And the remote control, the device that will detonate the explosive, is in the hand of someone who hates you, who has been dreaming for more than a year of destroying you. Why don’t you speak to him, Alex? Why don’t you ask him to take pity on you?”

On the screen, Jack had driven out of the compound. The Land Rover was already on the track and picking up speed.

“Please!” Alex felt hot liquid pouring out of the corners of his eyes. He couldn’t help himself. “Don’t . . .”

“I’m sorry?” Julius pushed his face into Alex’s. “I don’t think I heard you.”

“Please, Julius. I’ll do anything you want . . .”

“You’re doing exactly what I want,” Julius said. He was holding the remote control right in front of Alex’s face. Alex saw his thumb press down.

The car blew up. The images weren’t black-and-white after all. The fireball was bright red and orange at the center. The explosion seemed to take in the entire desert and sky. For a moment there was no image at all. Then the cameras picked up the flaming skeleton of the car, lying still, with fire roaring through the shattered windows, and he knew that Jack Starbright was dead.

Jack Starbright, who had looked after him since he was seven. Who had been at his side at the funeral of his uncle and who had tried to protect him once Ian Rider's secrets had taken over his life. Jack Starbright, who had packed his books for school and taken care of his bullet wounds, always cheerful, always on his side. Jack Starbright, the one person he could confide in, who understood him better than anyone, and who should never have set foot in the terrible, shadowy world that he had inherited. Alex Rider's grief burst out of him. There was no stopping it. The tears were coursing down his cheeks. He was howling, his whole body contorted, his eyes tightly shut. At the same time, Julius Grief was capering about him, laughing, while Razim examined his apparatus, tapping at a keyboard, comparing different readings.

"It's extraordinary," he muttered. "We've never had readings like this. Never. It seems that I have completely underestimated the power of emotional pain. I may even have to create a second scale of measurement. This is really quite remarkable."

Alex slumped forward, his head lolling against his chest. He had blacked out. But still the machines sucked out and translated his emotions . . . the computers, the monitors, the printers, the gauges.

"Wasn't that great!" Julius exclaimed. "Wasn't that cool!"

"Go to bed, Julius," Razim replied. He picked up a printout and held it up to examine the figures. "I have work to do."

Two guards had arrived. They untied Alex and dragged him away. Julius followed them out of the room. Razim sat where he was, deep in thought.

Out in the desert, the flames flickered in the darkness, throwing jagged red shadows across the sand.



HALF AN INCH

THE CONVOY WAS MOVING SWIFTLY through the streets of Cairo. There were nine vehicles in all, starting with two police cars and four outriders on motorbikes. The three cars at the center of the procession were identical: oversized black limousines with tinted windows and a miniature Stars and Stripes fluttering at the corner. The cars had begun their journey a mile away, at the American embassy in Garden City, and from the moment they had swung out of the gates and onto the main road, a whole army of Egyptian policemen had been deployed to keep them moving, with officers holding back the traffic at every corner and at every light. From the air, the convoy might have looked like a living animal, a snake perhaps, burrowing its way through a hundred thousand ants.

The secretary of state was in the first limousine. It might have been safer for her to ride in the middle one with CIA agents in front and behind . . . but this was also the more obvious target. Even though the cars were armor plated, an armor-piercing missile launched from a rooftop was always a possibility. All the roofs had been checked. Armed policemen had taken up strategic positions all the way along the route and would remain there until the night was over. The man known as the Engineer

had been seen in Cairo. He might have been killed, but not before he had provided an assassin with a weapon. Nothing could be left to chance.

Sitting in the backseat, next to the window, the secretary of state watched the drab buildings and the stationary traffic as they flashed by. She was a small woman with steely eyes and tied-back silver hair, wearing an off-white silk jacket and skirt, a white shirt, and a jade necklace that had been given to her by the Chinese premier on a recent visit. There was a short, bald-headed man in a dark suit next to her. He looked nervous, but she knew it had nothing to do with the security arrangements. He was her foreign policy adviser and was already thinking about what she was going to say. It was always a dangerous business, making new enemies, and her speech tonight would do just that. Her driver and bodyguard—both CIA men—were in the front. They knew nothing. To them, it was just another business trip.

It seemed to have gotten dark very early. It was only half past six, but the sky was already black. It was going to rain. The temperature had risen too high even for this sweltering city and it was obvious that something was going to break soon. The clouds were so heavy that they looked as if they were about to fall out of the sky, and the air was sticking to everything it touched. Even the air-conditioning inside the car seemed to be fighting a losing battle.

“It’s a pretty nasty night, Jeff,” she said. Her foreign policy adviser’s name was Jeff Townsend.

“Could be a downpour,” Jeff agreed.

“I thought it didn’t rain in Cairo.”

“It doesn’t rain often, ma’am. But when it rains . . . it rains.”

The secretary of state had a headache. It had been nagging at her ever since she had touched down in the presidential plane. She leaned forward. “Do you have an aspirin, Harry?”

“Sure thing, ma’am.” Her bodyguard was also a trained medic. He handed her two pills, which she swallowed with a sip of mineral water from a bottle.

The convoy crossed the Nile on University Bridge and swept around El-Gamaa Square—actually a circular area and one that would normally have been jammed with traffic. It continued up a wide avenue with palm trees on each side and lawns and fountains running up the center. The university itself lay straight ahead. Even on a normal day, security at the campus was high, with students passing through a single gateway and showing ID before they were allowed to continue. But this week, security levels had soared with triple checks, full body searches, metal detectors, the works. The main Assembly Hall had been in lockdown for the past twenty-four hours. Egyptian police with sniffer dogs had finished searching the place for the fifth time just a few hours ago.

The limousine drove through the gate. White-suited police stood at attention and saluted as it passed. And then they were in the campus itself, with searchlights swinging across the ground, people everywhere, helicop-

ters hovering overhead. Even the secretary of state began to feel a little anxious. She noticed that inside the compound, the police were wearing black and carried machine guns. Of course, she was used to this. She couldn't even cross Washington, DC, without the same sort of security. But she was in a strange place, far away from home. And this thick, unnatural darkness. It felt like the end of the world.

The driver stopped exactly where he had been told. Even with the unpredictable Cairo traffic, everything had been planned with such precision that the secretary of state was only fifty seconds late. Someone ran forward and opened the door. She got out.

She stood in front of a massive building that resembled a museum, an opera house, or perhaps a library with a million books. It stretched all the way across the main campus, its huge dome supported by five columns with steps that could have been purposefully designed for the arrival of a president or a head of state. A red carpet led the way, with crash barriers on both sides, keeping back the crowds of journalists and photographers. There was the usual line of important people waiting to meet her, and the secretary of state found herself shaking hands with politicians, academics, and businessmen . . . people she had never met before and would never see again. A hundred cameras flashed in the heavy heat. She felt a drop of rain on her shoulder and looked up. A pair of helicopters buzzed overhead, their searchlights scissoring down.

Around the corner from the main entrance, in a separate space where they could be kept out of sight, a whole fleet of brightly colored vans stood silently, feeding on the images of the arrival. These were OBUs—Outside Broadcast Units—and they had been sent to record the speech for worldwide transmission. The BBC were there, along with Sky, CNN, Fox, Al Jazeera, and news teams from all over the Middle East, jammed together in a tangle of thick black cables and satellite dishes. As the secretary of state continued along the lines, shaking hands and nodding at smiling faces, her image was captured on a hundred television screens. The OBUs were small and packed with equipment: monitor stacks, sound desks, vision racks, electric generators. Some of them had two or three producers already playing with the images, dissolving from one to another, then cutting back to some presenter in a studio miles away. A little girl handed the secretary of state some flowers. The producers grabbed the moment, going in for the close-up, the reaction shot, the applause from the crowd. This was the big speech. It had to have a big buildup too.

The OBUs had arrived earlier in the day, filing in one at a time through the main gate. Each one carried a special permit on the window and every driver had shown his ID. But the vans themselves had not been searched. They were, after all, going to remain outside the building, and even if a journalist or a sound engineer had wanted to break into the Assembly Hall, it would have been completely impossible. Security was too tight. The Outside

Broadcast Units were always there. They were part of the event. Nobody had considered that they might represent a threat.

But they were wrong.

One of the vans belonged to a television company called Al Minya and had arrived with the name in bright red letters and a pyramid logo painted on the side. It carried the right permit, and the driver, dressed in white overalls with the same red pyramid on his top pocket, had shown what seemed to be an authentic ID. But if anyone had decided to telephone Al Minya—which was a real cable company—they would have been told that they weren't actually covering the speech. They hadn't sent an OBU, although, as it happened, one of their vehicles had recently had to go in for repairs.

If they had checked the license plate, they would have discovered that this was the missing vehicle. They might then have discovered that the driver—shaven headed and built like a bulldog—had never worked in television and that his real name was Erik Gunter.

And finally, they might have searched the van and found an English schoolboy, sitting with his arms tied and a gag in his mouth, a prisoner, inside.

They had brought Alex Rider back from the Siwa Oasis that afternoon, landing the Sikorsky H-34 at the same building site where he had been taken from the Northern Cemetery. He was wearing his Cairo College uniform

and was securely belted in place. Without the belt, he would have slumped forward. He seemed to be half asleep.

Gunter was waiting with the Al Minya van when the helicopter landed, and even he was a little surprised by the change in the boy who had been captured forty-eight hours before. Despite his time in the sun, Alex was an ashen white and there was a lost, empty quality to his eyes. When he was ordered to step down from the cabin, he did just that, and he didn't move as his hands were tied up in front of him. Gunter led him into the van. Alex stumbled briefly at the doorway, steadying himself on one of the countertops. But he said nothing and he didn't try to resist. There hardly seemed any point gagging him. He looked completely defeated.

"What have you done to him?" Gunter asked.

Julius Grief had sprung down from the helicopter and followed them across the rubble-strewn ground. Like Alex, he was in school uniform. "We played a little joke on him," he explained. "But I don't think he enjoyed it."

Four hours later, the Al Minya van was in its place at the very end of the line, farthest away from the entrance where the secretary of state had arrived. Along with all the other OBUs, it was plugged into the main feed being delivered by the television network inside the Assembly Hall and received the same images as all the news channels. Julius Grief hadn't come with them. Gunter and Alex were alone.

Gunter was beginning to feel unnerved by the long silence and by the semiconscious boy sitting tied by his arms and feet to a metal chair between two banks of machinery. He took out his gun—it was a black, Russian-made Tokarev TT-33, the same gun that Alex had found in his office—and laid it on the desk, within easy reach. He had checked that the door of the OBU was locked, but if anyone tried to come in, he wouldn't hesitate to kill them. Then he clicked open a can of Coke and turned one of the dials on the control panel in front of him.

“ . . . and the secretary of state has just arrived, and we can see her entering the building. The man beside her is Jeff Townsend, who has been her foreign policy adviser for the past two years . . . ”

The voice was that of a CNN newscaster. Gunter could see the secretary of state on one of the monitors. She was walking down a wide corridor with officials applauding on both sides. Then the image cut to the audience waiting inside the Assembly Hall. There were two thousand people there, sitting on three levels. Everyone was dressed smartly, packed together in rows that curved around in front of a stage that was decorated with a single podium and two American flags.

From where he was sitting, Alex had a good view of the screen. But he didn't seem to be interested. Gunter wondered if he even knew where he was. Well, it didn't matter. He glanced at his watch. The speech was due to

start in twelve minutes. And five minutes after that, Alex would be dead.

He stretched a hand out and turned off the sound.

“I expect you want to know what this is all about,” Gunter said. He didn’t really care if Alex wanted to know or not. He just felt a need to break the silence between them.

With the gag in his mouth, Alex couldn’t talk. He didn’t look as if he wanted to.

Gunter thought for a moment, then took out a knife, which flicked open in his hand. “I’m going to untie you,” he said. “Because you’ll be leaving here shortly. But if you even try to stand up or to get out of that chair before I give you permission, I will shoot you in the stomach. Do you understand that?”

Alex nodded very slightly.

“Good.”

Gunter stood up and leaned over him, cutting the ropes behind him, releasing his arms. He stepped back quickly in case Alex tried to lash out—but the boy didn’t even seem to be aware that he was free. Gunter cut the rest of the cords, took off the gag, and sat down again. There was very little space between them. The gun was right next to him and his eyes had never left Alex’s. The different screens inside the OBU showed pictures of the audience, the Assembly Hall from outside, the empty stage.

“That’s better,” Gunter said. “We still have a bit of time together and I’d quite like to explain what’s going

on. The fact of the matter is that Scorpia has put together a rather brilliant plan and this is where it ends—just you and me, in this van. You get a bullet, I'm afraid. And do you know what I get? A million dollars—just for moving one finger half an inch.

“I've never actually killed a kid before, and for what it's worth, I don't feel too good about it. But you see, it's not my fault. You don't know anything about me, so let me tell you. When I came out of Afghanistan . . . Do you know how many bullets I have in me? They dug two of them out, but there are still two of them lodged inside—they couldn't reach them—and they're killing me. I can feel them. I took those bullets for my men and I was glad to do it. But when I got home, well, suddenly I discovered that I wasn't quite the hero that I thought. They put me in a hospital in Birmingham—it was even a mixed ward, can you believe it? I was in pain all the time. You have no idea how much pain. But when I rang the bell, nobody came. Sometimes I was just left there to soil the bed. It was disgusting. And in the end, when I was able to limp out of there, oh yes, they gave me the medal. But they didn't give me a decent pension. The army didn't want to know. I couldn't even get a job. You know? Nobody gives a damn about the war in Afghanistan. Nobody cares. So when Scorpia came along, when they offered me this opportunity, do you think I was going to say no? A million dollars, Alex. And too bad that I have to kill a kid. But right now I have to look out for number one.”

Alex didn't speak.

Gunter leaned over and suddenly slapped him. Alex's head rocked backward. "Talk to me, dammit," he said. "I want to know what you think."

"I don't think anything," Alex said.

Gunter nodded, as if this was enough. "I wonder if you've ever heard of the Elgin marbles," he went on. "Did you ever study them in class? Or perhaps you visited them at the British Museum. Well, believe it or not—and this must sound very strange to you, sitting here in the middle of Cairo—that's what this is all about. There was this rich Greek guy called Ariston and he wanted them sent back to Athens. Can you believe that? He was the one who hired Scorpia, and they've been playing you like a puppet on a string . . . you and MI6. You've been complete idiots from the very start.

"This is how it works." Gunter tilted his watch again. "In eleven minutes' time, the American secretary of state is going to begin a speech. She'll make some general remarks about the Middle East . . . We've already seen a draft of what she's going to say. And then, she'll start talking about the balance of power in the world and how completely and utterly useless and untrustworthy we Brits have become. And at that moment there'll be a shot in the auditorium . . . a hidden assassin . . . and I'm afraid the poor woman will be killed. There will, of course, be an immediate panic. There are two thousand people in there and they'll all come stampeding out. It's dark and it

looks like it's about to rain, which will help. Nobody will have any idea what's going on—which is exactly what we want. Because at that moment, I'm going to kill you too.”

Gunter was about to continue, but just then an image came up on one of the television screens and he reached out and jabbed one of the buttons on the console, freezing it. Still keeping half an eye on Alex, he turned a dial. The image zoomed in and Alex saw exactly what he was meant to see. A row of boys and girls in dark blue and light blue uniforms—the politics group from the Cairo International College of Arts and Education. The principal, Monty Jordan, was at one end of the line. Miss Watson was at the other. Julius Grief was between them, chatting to Gabriella, the daughter of the ambassador. Of course, she would think he was Alex. He looked like Alex and he sounded like Alex, and she hadn't really known him long enough to tell the difference.

“Ah—there you are!” Gunter exclaimed. “Did you ever wonder how your name got onto the politics group? I put it there, of course. They do lots of visits like this and there was no way they were going to miss the American secretary of state. Mr. Jordan got tickets for the whole group and there you are, right in the middle of them.

“Any minute now, you'll stand up and leave the auditorium. You'll tell the principal that you're not feeling well and need some fresh air. You'll slip around the back, passing quite close to this van, as it happens. Then you'll go back inside through a service door, and that's when

the shot will be fired. And the next time anyone sees you, you'll be lying dead on the tarmac with a bullet in your head."

"You want people to think that I killed her." It was the first time that Alex had volunteered anything, and he sounded almost matter-of-fact, as if he didn't care what happened.

"Exactly. You've finally worked it out. You see, Scorpia has been recording you and filming you for quite a few weeks now. They've created a whole file about you—the Horseman file, they call it. What's in it? Well, there's a lot of information about your other missions, proving that you've worked for MI6 in the past. But there's also a film of the day Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones drove to see you in Chelsea, including a recording of the entire conversation. With a little editing, it will prove conclusively that they sent you to Cairo, although it won't say why. We even intercepted the e-mail booking that shows that MI6 paid for your flight tickets.

"And then there's the matter of the weapon being used to kill the secretary of state. You'll remember that I took several pictures of you holding it, and at the same time you'll have left your DNA and fingerprints all over it. We've also got plenty of evidence tying you in with the death of Mr. Habib. I was actually quite surprised that you fell for that old trick, listening in on my telephone call outside the school office. I knew you'd followed me to the House of Gold. And what does everyone think? You see

Habib, you get the gun, and the next minute he's dead and the boat's been blown up. Who did it? Well, you did, of course."

Gunter drank some of the Coke, then put the can down.

"So what happens now?" he went on. "The secretary of state has been assassinated just as she was about to start an anti-British speech. The whole of Cairo is in an uproar. At the same time, a British schoolboy is found dead at the scene. His classmates can testify that he was behaving very strangely and left the Assembly Hall minutes before the shot was fired. Rumors begin to swirl around. As always, there are conspiracy theories. People say that British intelligence was involved in the shooting and that the dead teenager was actually working for them. Of course, they deny it. And after a few days or maybe weeks, the press moves on and everything becomes quiet again. It looks as if they've gotten away with it.

"And then Scorpia moves in with the Horseman file. They have all the proof they need to show that in this case the conspiracy theories are true. Alex Rider *was* an MI6 agent. He *was* the killer. We have photographic evidence, forensic evidence, films, recordings, intercepts . . . and we'll pass the whole lot over to the Americans unless you do exactly what we say. The British government will have no choice! The Horseman file would quite simply blow their country apart. It would make them the enemy of the entire world. Can you imagine how nervous they will be, Alex? They will be at the complete mercy of Scorpia. What is it that we want? A billion dollars? A trillion?

But—no! All we ask for is an announcement that the Elgin marbles will be returned—immediately—to their correct home. Maybe it'll upset a few art historians and some pompous professors, but it's really a tiny price to pay.

“And here's a funny thing. As it happens, the secretary of state has Greek parentage. Her mother was born in Athens. So the British government can announce that they're sending back the marbles in her honor! Everyone will be happy. The prime minister will even be congratulated on his consideration. He will see at once that he has no choice but to agree.

“Everyone wins. I get paid. Scorpia gets paid. The Greeks get their marbles. MI6 gets the file. The only losers, I suppose, are the secretary of state and you. She'll be killed in . . .” Another turn of the watch. “In seven minutes' time. And you die the moment Julius Grief gets back to this van. He's asked to watch when I pull the trigger, by the way. I don't think he likes you very much.”

Gunter finished speaking and looked back at the television screen. All the cameras were now fixed on the stage inside the Assembly Hall, and even as he watched, a tall, dark-haired Egyptian man appeared and began to address the crowd in Arabic. The secretary of state was about to walk on. Her speech was about to begin. He turned up the volume but kept it low.

“Julius should have left by now,” Gunter said. “You have very little time left, Alex. In a way, I feel sorry for you. But if there's a moral in all this, it's that kids

shouldn't get mixed up in adult affairs. You should have known that. Now it's too late."

"I want something," Alex said. His voice was neutral.

"Oh yes?" Gunter was surprised that Alex had asked for anything at all.

"I want a cigarette."

"A cigarette?"

"Yes."

"When did you start smoking?"

"A year ago."

Gunter shook his head. "It's a bad habit. You're too young to smoke."

"It's not going to kill me now. What difference does it make?"

"You have a point." Gunter shrugged. "But I'm afraid I don't smoke. I don't have any cigarettes."

"There's a pack over there." Alex nodded at the work surface near the door, just behind Gunter. Sure enough, there was a pack of Black Devils—the cigarettes smoked by Razim—lying on the surface.

Gunter glanced over his shoulder. The cigarette pack was within easy reach. "I hope you're not trying to trick me," he said. "You think you can distract my attention? Let me assure you that I could shoot you dead before you even realized I'd picked up the gun."

"I don't care what you do to me," Alex said. "I just want a cigarette."

"All right. If you want the truth, Alex, I think you're a little pathetic. But if that really is your last wish . . ."

Without taking his eyes off Alex, Gunter reached back for the cigarette pack, opened it, and slid his hand inside to take out a cigarette.

And screamed.

In half a second, all his poise and self-control had gone. The gun was forgotten. Even Alex didn't matter anymore. All he was aware of was the pain blasting its way through the palm of his hand and up his arm—all the way to his shoulder. The pain was crippling. It was tearing at his heart.

And from out of the cigarette pack crawled a mature, angry, fat-tailed scorpion. The sting of such a creature is not always lethal, but this one had been a prisoner inside the cigarette pack for almost twelve hours, and in that time it had been filling its glandular sacs with poison, waiting for the moment when it could attack. As soon as Gunter had opened the pack, it had struck, its barb—or *hypodermic aculeus*—injecting a dose of fast-acting neurotoxins into the palm of his hand. At the same instant, Alex had come back to life, springing out of the chair and snatching up the gun in one movement. He didn't have time to load it. Instead, he swung it with all his strength into Gunter's face. He heard the man's nose break. With blood spouting, still clutching his injured hand, Gunter fell back, lost his balance, and fell. His head hit the edge of the countertop with a sickening thud. His neck snapped forward. He lay still.

Alex stood where he was, breathing heavily.

He had noticed the nest of scorpions outside his cell

the day he had arrived at Siwa Oasis. With no gadgets and no weapons, he had begun to formulate a plan long before Jack Starbright had tried to escape. He had stolen the cigarette pack at breakfast. He had concealed it in his cell. And he had been awake all night—the longest night of his life—hoping that a scorpion would reappear. The adult had climbed in through the windows a few hours after sunrise. Alex had managed to trap it in the cigarette pack and had been keeping it in his pocket ever since.

He had slipped the cigarette pack into position as he entered the OBU, pretending to stumble. It had been there ever since.

Alex's face had barely changed. His eyes were still far away. But now there was a pinprick of something there, deep inside them. Had Gunter been conscious or even alive, he might have described it as a spark of fury. Alex examined the gun. It was quite heavy in his hand, but he could see that it would be fairly simple to use, with an external hammer, no safety catch, and a detachable box magazine in the handle holding eight bullets. It was fully loaded. Alex slipped it into the waistband of his trousers. He was going to need it.

There was a round of applause and Alex glanced at the screens. The American secretary of state was walking onto the stage. The audience had risen to its feet. Alex took one last look at Gunter. The Scorpia man didn't seem to be breathing. His hand looked like a rubber glove that someone had pumped full of air. It reminded Alex

that there was an angry scorpion somewhere inside the Outside Broadcast Unit. It was time to go.

He found the lock and slid the door open to find himself facing the Assembly Hall just a few yards in front of him. It was very dark but the rain hadn't started yet. A blast of warm, heavy air rubbed against his face, taking over from the air-conditioning. He could see the other OBUs. Some of them had kept their doors open, allowing the gray-and-white flicker of their television monitors to escape into the night. There were no policemen or guards in sight, and he guessed that they would either be around the main entrance or else inside the Assembly Hall, concentrating on the audience and the stage.

But then a single figure flitted in front of him, keeping close to the main wall, hurrying around the back of the building. He was dressed in dark blue trousers and a light blue shirt and he was breathing heavily. Somehow he must have been delayed. Perhaps one of the CIA men had tried to stop him from leaving the building. He wasn't carrying any weapon, of course. He would have been searched on the way in and possibly on the way out too.

It was Julius Grief.

Alex slid the door of the OBU shut behind him and set off in pursuit.

CAIRO STORM

“GOOD EVENING, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. It’s a real pleasure to find myself back in Egypt, a country that has always been a good friend to democracy. It’s certainly warm this evening. But it’s nothing compared with the warmth of your welcome.”

An image of the American secretary of state was being projected onto a vast television monitor at the back of the stage, her head and shoulders looming over the actual woman herself. She was standing between the two flags with the lectern in front of her. Her opening words had been projected onto a glass screen that stood just on the edge of her vision, and they could be read only from her side. In front of her, two thousand people greeted her opening remarks with a ripple of applause that seemed to spread out and grow, rising all the way to the dome.

The front rows and special galleries to the left and to the right were taken up by Egyptian politicians, sheikhs, diplomats, and businesspeople, dressed in smart suits, bright white dishdashas, sparkling evening dresses, and jewelry. In the far distance, three tiers up, the spectators at the very back were little more than gray smudges in the shadows. Security men stood at every door and at intervals along the aisles, watching not the secretary of state

but the people watching her. All the exits had been closed moments before she had begun to speak. Nobody would be allowed in until she had finished. And—unless there was an emergency—nobody would be allowed to leave.

The lights in the halls had been dimmed, but there were spotlights focused on the stage, trapping the speaker in a perfect white circle. The light and sound levels were being controlled by two technicians in a sealed-off cabin with a plate glass window constructed underneath the first circle. But most of the machinery, including the projection equipment for the plasma TV, was actually concealed much higher up. A winding staircase led all the way from the ground floor, following the curve of the dome. At the top there was a low, arched doorway leading into an area packed with fuses, circuit boards, and temperature gauges. This second control room had been built into the ceiling at the very center of the dome and slightly resembled the cockpit of a spaceship: completely circular with narrow slits that would have given someone a bird's-eye view of the stage—if they had been allowed inside.

The room had been quickly identified as a grade-one security risk, an ideal position for a would-be assassin. It had been thoroughly searched—not once but several times. The door was locked from outside and a CIA man had been in position, sitting there on his own, since nine o'clock that morning. He was there now, trying to listen to the speech, which sounded muffled and distant. He

was bored. When Joe Byrne had named the protection details and started handing out jobs, he had certainly drawn the short straw.

The CIA agent couldn't have known that the weapon that was going to be used to kill the secretary of state, the L96A1 Arctic Warfare sniper rifle, was already in place and that Julius Grief, who had been trained as a sharpshooter since the age of nine, was already on his way to collect it. In a few minutes' time, he would take his place behind the door and the moment the secretary of state uttered the word *Britain* for the first time, he would fire, sending a .300 Winchester Magnum bullet traveling at 850 meters per second into her head.

Far below, she was already developing her theme.

"The theme of my talk this evening is friendship. Who are the long-term partners, who can we still trust in a rapidly changing world?"

Her voice rang out, echoing around the great Assembly Hall. The words scrolled, line by line, up the Plexiglas teleprompter. Another page of general introduction. Then she would read the word that would spell out her death.

Alex Rider watched as Julius Grief crept around the side of the building, doing his best to keep out of sight on the other side of the parked cars and OBUs. The other boy was close enough for him to make out the light brown hair, the pale skin, and even his intense, cold-blooded gaze. But Julius hadn't noticed him. He was in too much

of a hurry, making up for lost time, and his attention was fixed on the way ahead, stepping over the cables that were strewn along the tarmac. Alex followed. He could feel the heat of the night bearing down on him. It was as if he were carrying the whole weight of the world on his shoulders, as if the coming storm were trying to pound him down.

On the other side of the wall, a major international speech was being delivered by the second-most powerful politician from the United States. Her words were about to cause a political firestorm. And here, out in the darkness, two identical twins were stalking each other, one of them with murder on his mind. What would a security guard have made of it? But there were no closed-circuit TV cameras back here, and there didn't seem to be anyone around apart from the television crews, locked up in their steel boxes. Why should there have been? There was surely only one way into the Assembly Hall and that was around at the front.

And yet . . .

Alex saw the open door even as Julius began to make his way toward it. That was insanity. The whole place was crawling with police and security men. After all the preparation and with the speech meaning so much, were the authorities just going to let anyone stroll in?

Julius disappeared through the doorway. Alex allowed a few seconds to pass, but before he could sprint across the open space and go in himself, the worst happened

and two armed soldiers suddenly appeared, walking around the corner, talking together. Alex ducked behind one of the parked cars, waiting for them to move on. But they didn't seem to be in any hurry. They were standing right outside the door—it didn't seem to bother them that it was open—and had chosen this moment to have a cigarette. Alex saw one of them produce a pack and offer it to the other. Both of them lit up. Alex was so close that he even caught a whiff of the burning tobacco cutting through the heavy air.

What should he do? Julius Grief would be well on his way to his position, wherever that might be. Eleven minutes—that was what Gunter had said—and at least six of them must have already passed. Alex was tempted to make himself known, to raise the alarm. But he knew it would do no good. The soldiers would probably speak little or no English. Even if they did, it was unlikely they would believe a fifteen-year-old boy. He would be arrested and dragged out of the area and by the time he had spoken to someone in authority, the American secretary of state would be dead.

Of course, Scorpia's plan would still have failed. Alex would be able to prove that he hadn't been involved and the so-called Horseman file would be useless. But that wasn't enough. In the confusion, after the shot had been fired, Julius Grief might escape. Razim had already said that he was planning to slip away to another country. Alex had already decided. That wasn't going to happen.

He looked around him, searching for a stone, a brick, anything heavy. It was hard to see in the darkness, but he noticed a shard of light glinting off a steel nut that must have come unscrewed from a piece of equipment. Alex reached out and took it, balancing it in the palm of his hand. Yes. It would do. He twisted around and threw it with all his strength. The nut arced through the darkness and hit the side of a car, denting the metalwork. The noise was loud enough to make the two soldiers jump. At once, they dropped their cigarettes and hurried forward to see what had happened. Alex watched them go past, then darted over to the door. He didn't need to be careful anymore. Julius Grief would be well ahead of him by now. The real worry was that he might already be too late.

And now he understood why no one had shown any interest in the open door. It led into a narrow service room, hardly more than a corridor, illuminated by two bare lightbulbs dangling on wires. There were a couple of metal buckets and a mop, some empty crates, and, about five yards away, a brick wall with a row of hooks and a pair of dirty overalls hanging above the floor. Some old furniture—folding chairs and filing cabinets—had been stored on one side. A row of very old, dusty fuse boxes lined the other. It was nothing more than a dead end. The corridor went nowhere.

Alex would have moved on. He would have thought he'd made a mistake. But he recognized the room. He had seen it in one of the photographs in Gunter's desk.

He stepped inside. Julius Grief had definitely come in here—but how could he possibly have disappeared? Alex had watched him come in here. He had been watching the entrance ever since. There were no other doors; there was no other way out. If Julius had slipped back out again, Alex would have seen him.

The hooks.

It seemed like years ago that Alex had been in the office at Cairo College. Razim had boasted that he had manipulated Alex from the start—but breaking in had surely been the one thing that he couldn't have foreseen. Razim had arranged for him to come to the school. The fake telephone call had led him to the House of Gold. But nobody could have guessed that he would use one of Smithers's gadgets to get into the office. And so it surely followed that whatever he had found in the secret drawer must actually mean something. It hadn't been left there for him to find.

The newspaper—the *Washington Post*—must have been reporting the visit of the secretary of state. The pictures of the Assembly Hall . . . that was where her speech was taking place. This room. And the photograph of a hook shaped like a swan's neck. It was identical to the ones he was looking at now.

Alex had moved forward even before he had arrived at the end of his thought process. He reached out and grabbed one of the hooks, then another. He was expecting them to twist and turn, but in fact the third one pulled

down like an oversized switch. He heard a click and a section of the wall swung open, revealing a metal staircase constructed between two solid concrete walls, so narrow that he would have to turn sideways to climb it.

At once he understood the cleverness of Scorpia's plan. How do you put an assassin inside a building that will be surrounded, searched from top to bottom, kept under constant surveillance, and locked up for twenty-four hours? Answer—you build a secret passage weeks or months before your target arrives. Alex had no doubt at all that the sniper rifle had been concealed here, ready for Julius Grief to find and to carry up with him. No wonder he had been empty-handed when he had gone in. All he had to do was pick it up, climb to a good vantage point, and fire. He wouldn't even have to leave if he didn't want to. He could stay completely hidden for days.

Alex was already climbing the staircase, which had been built between the inner and outer shell of the Assembly Hall in a space that might have been used for pipework or perhaps to help with the circulation of cool air. There were no lights, and after about ten steps away from the secret opening, he was plunged into blackness. Presumably Julius had brought a flashlight. But Alex didn't need to see. The staircase was made out of metal slabs, each one placed at a regular interval so that provided he kept the same rhythm, moving his feet the same distance, he wouldn't stumble or fall. The walls on either side helped too, keeping him wedged in place. He was

completely blind, but it didn't matter. He knew where he was going and what he had to do.

He continued up, knowing from the ache in his legs that the staircase was taking him all the way to the top of the Assembly Hall. He felt himself curving around and guessed that he was inside the dome. He hadn't been counting but he knew he must have climbed at least two hundred steps. How much time had it taken? That didn't matter, provided he wasn't already too late.

He saw light at the same time as he heard a voice—a woman speaking in an American accent, a long way away, as if on the other side of a curtain.

“. . . the United States has always valued its special relationships with countries all over the world. However, I believe that with the shift in global power, we have to look at those relationships again . . .”

Alex reached into his waistband and drew out the Tokarev TT-33 that he had taken from Gunter. Clutching it in his hand, he edged forward. Part of him was screaming at him to hurry. But at the same time he knew he could make no noise. He was moving toward an entrance . . . not a door but a jagged opening cut into the brickwork, barely big enough to crawl through. The light was flickering, as if projected from a television screen.

“One country in particular has, in my view, failed to move forward with the times . . .”

Alex looked through the doorway and saw Julius Grief lying on his stomach with the sniper rifle that Alex himself

had once handled pressed against his shoulder, the tip of the barrel resting on a narrow, slitlike window at floor level. Julius was wearing latex gloves . . . He wouldn't leave his own fingerprints on the stock or the trigger.

"That country is our friend and will remain our friend. But I think it is time to recognize that it no longer has very much influence on international affairs . . ."

The control room was completely circular, like an up-turned bowl, and looked as if it hadn't actually been used for years. It had a shabby gray carpet, banks of old machinery, pulleys and wheels, electric generators, and tin boxes that might contain air-conditioning units. All of these were connected by a tangle of pipes and cables. Julius was lying with his feet toward Alex. Looking over his shoulder, out the window, Alex saw what he was aiming at: a huge head, a smart-looking woman with silver hair. No. That was the television screen. The actual target was much smaller, standing in front of it, leaning on a lectern. The secretary of state. He could imagine the crosshairs in the scope centering on her head.

"We all know which country I'm referring to . . ."

Alex saw Julius tighten his grip on the rifle and knew that the moment had come and that he had to act.

"Julius!" he shouted.

On the stage, the woman heard the shout. It had broken through the silence of the auditorium. She paused and looked up.

Julius Grief reacted with incredible speed. He had

been about to fire at his target, but instead he whipped around like an injured snake, turning the gun on Alex. Alex ducked back into the darkness as Julius fired, the sound of the bullet explosive in the small space. The gunshot was incredibly loud—purposefully so. It had always been part of Scorpia’s plan to cause panic, to help Julius and Gunter to make their escape.

The secretary of state never uttered the word *Britain*. Her security men were already on the stage, rushing toward her, forming a protective human shield, covering every angle. In an instant, she had disappeared from sight. It took the audience a few more seconds to realize what had happened. The people in the front seats were the first to get to their feet, pushing sideways, fighting with each other in their hurry to get out. Panic spread like some incredible virus, rippling in every direction, transforming the crowd which seconds before had been seated and silent into a seething, surging mass.

Grief’s first bullet had missed Alex, smashing into the brickwork above his head even as he had pulled back. Instantly, he reloaded. Alex had misjudged his own movement. Either a piece of broken pipe or a part of the wall—it was impossible to tell in the darkness—had jabbed into his right arm, sending a bolt of pain all the way up to his shoulder, numbing him. He was forced to waste precious seconds recovering, then lunged back into the control room, knowing that the narrow entrance would slow him down and that Julius would have the advantage over him.

Sure enough, as he reentered the circular chamber, he saw that Julius had already reloaded and that the gun was aimed directly at him, no more than a few feet away. At this range, it would be impossible to miss. He saw death in the other boy's eyes.

And then the door—the real door to the room—flew open and the CIA man who had been standing guard burst in. He was young, in his twenties, with the same clean-cut, boyish looks that all the agents seemed to share. There was a gun clasped in his hands. He had taken up a stance with his legs apart, ready to fire.

For two or maybe three seconds, nobody did anything. Julius and Alex had been aiming at each other. The agent was right between them. He had a gun in his hand but didn't know which way to turn it. It was obvious to him that there had been a major security breach, but what he was seeing didn't make any sense. He was looking at two boys, identically dressed in some sort of school uniform, identical to each other in every way. All his training and years of experience in the field hadn't prepared him for anything like this.

It was the weapon that decided him. Someone had just taken a shot at the secretary of state, and although one of these kids had a pistol, the other was holding a rifle. He must be the enemy. The agent brought his gun around. Julius did the same and he was the first to fire. The bullet smashed into the man's chest, throwing him back toward Alex. The two of them fell backward. The

dead man was on top of him, pinning him down but at the same time shielding him from any further shots. Julius realized he had run out of time. He had to leave. He threw the rifle down and ran out the door that the agent had opened. Alex clambered to his feet and went after him.

This was the real service staircase. It was made up of wide concrete slabs with white-painted walls and it was lit by a series of neon strips. Alex took the steps three at a time. He was fairly certain that Julius was unarmed. If he'd had another gun on him, he'd have surely tried to use it. The real danger was that once the other boy reached the bottom, he would all too easily lose himself in the crowd. Alex knew that there were two thousand people down below, surging out into the night. If Julius got too far ahead of him, he would disappear in seconds and Alex was grimly determined—he was going to end this tonight.

The staircase emerged on the far side of the building, away from the OBUs, with the main gates visible ahead. Alex burst out into a scene of pure chaos. There were people everywhere, scattering across the ornamental lawns. Tourist police were shouting at them, blowing whistles, waving frantically with gloved hands, but everyone was ignoring them. More police cars were arriving with lights stabbing at the darkness, sirens adding to the confusion. Here and there, Alex caught sight of security men, Americans, shouting into their throat mikes, barely

able to hear a word. The night was thicker than ever and the Assembly Hall loomed over them, massive and swollen, like a bomb about to go off. Alex sucked in the warm air. He was already sweating. It was like being inside a gigantic oven.

Where was Grief? Alex searched for him, trying to pick out the blue uniform from the swirl of suits and cocktail dresses. There was no sign of the other students from Cairo College, but they could have been anywhere. A voice erupted in Arabic, speaking through a bullhorn. It was accompanied by an electric whine of static. Where was he? Alex was afraid that he was too late, that he had already got away.

And then he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye that somehow didn't fit into the pattern of fear and people taking flight. A flash of blue colliding with white. There he was! Julius had attacked one of the tourist police. Why would he want to do that? Alex watched the man go down with a knee in his solar plexus and saw Julius sweep something up from the edge of the lawn. Now he understood. Julius had decided to arm himself and he had taken the lightweight Vzor 27 pistol that is standard-issue to the Egyptian police. Well, that made two of them. Alex was still holding the Tokarev and he gripped it more tightly, balancing it in the palm of his hand. The chase had become more dangerous, but somehow it felt right. After all, the two of them were meant to be identical. Well, now they were.

He set off in pursuit. Julius must have sensed he was coming because he suddenly twisted around, and although they were a good sixty feet apart, separated by hundreds of people racing in every direction across the campus, their eyes locked. Alex wondered if Julius was going to shoot it out right here—but the other boy was in no mood for a fight. He had a policeman lying unconscious at his feet and it wouldn't be long before others noticed. With something like a snarl, he turned and began to run.

Alex went after him. He wasn't even trying to hide his own gun. The police and security men might be looking for a would-be assassin, but they would barely glance twice at a teenager in school uniform. Julius was getting close to the gate, burrowing through the crowd, using his elbow and fist to strike out at anyone who got in his way. Alex seemed to be moving more slowly, taking his time. But the distance between them remained the same and he knew, with a cold certainty, that he wasn't going to let the other boy slip out of his sight.

Julius was through. On the other side of the gates there was a wide, circular parking area with dozens of hawkers, taxi drivers, more policemen, and soldiers, some of whom still seemed unsure what exactly had taken place. A long avenue with fountains and statues led down to the main road, but the traffic had tied itself into an impossible knot with everyone trying to get away. As Alex reached the gate, he felt something hard hit him on the

shoulder and wondered if someone had struck him from behind. He turned briefly but there was no one there. Behind him, the Assembly Hall was lit by huge spotlights, bathed in a brilliant white glow. There were still people pouring out between the great pillars, surging toward him.

He was hit again, this time on the head, and felt water trickling down the side of his face. Now he understood. The storm was finally breaking. The first raindrops—as big as bullets—were already falling. He looked up in time to see a flash of lightning with all the power of the universe come scorching across the Cairo skyline. At the same moment, there was a roll of thunder so loud, it was as if the whole world had split in two. Then the rain came down in earnest.

It was incredible—a vertical flood. Within five seconds, Alex was completely drenched. The rain washed through his hair, swept over his shoulders and down into his shirt. He felt it coursing over his lips and into his mouth. It half blinded him. But he ignored it. Julius might think that the rain was on his side, that it would help to conceal him. Alex was going to prove him wrong.

The traffic, which had been barely moving, shuffling forward in fits and starts, had come to a complete halt. The cars were deluged. Windshield wipers that hadn't been used in months were being pushed into life, sluggishly sweeping curtains of water off the glass. Windows were being wound up, sunroofs desperately fastened. And still the drivers were beeping, as if they could some-

how persuade the bad weather to go away. Alex pressed forward, feeling the water surging over his ankles. The roads in Cairo have no drains. Already the cars seemed to be sitting in the middle of a river. There was a second blinding burst of lightning. The rain hammered down.

Julius was weaving between the stationary cars. Where was he going? Gunter had said that he was returning to the OBU. He had wanted to be there when Alex died. That plan was no longer open to him, but maybe there was a second getaway car out there, a driver waiting to take him to the helicopter. Alex quickened his pace. He had reached the line of traffic himself now. He moved past the cars, glimpsing the figures inside, almost invisible on the other side of the rain-soaked glass.

A gunshot. Alex wasn't even aware that Julius had fired, but he heard the bullet twang into the side of a gray Peugeot and saw the dent appear in the bodywork. Inside, the driver and two passengers screamed and threw themselves down. God knows what it must have sounded like for them, with the rain already pounding down on the roof. Perhaps they thought they'd just been struck by lightning. There was another shot and the side mirror of the car next to Alex exploded. Alex didn't even try to dodge the bullets. He lifted his own weapon, water dripping off the muzzle and the back of his hand. It occurred to him that from the day he had first joined MI6, he had wanted a gun, but he had never been allowed to have one. Well, that had all changed now. Blunt and Mrs. Jones

were nowhere near. This was between him and Julius Grief.

Julius had ducked out of sight, but suddenly he reappeared, running from one side of the road to the other, firing twice more. The windshield of a white van shattered and the driver must have panicked with his foot on the accelerator, because the vehicle shot forward, smashing into the car in front. A man got out of the second car, rising into the rain in front of Alex, already shouting in Arabic. Julius fired again and the man spun sideways, a flower of blood sprouting out of his shoulder. Alex saw him slump down beside his car, his face white. The driver of the van was staring out, terrified. The beeping was louder than ever. Alex held his pistol out in front of him. Julius had fired four, maybe five times. He couldn't have many bullets left.

There were only half a dozen cars between them now. The two of them were like duelists, trapped in a long line of traffic that stretched out as far as the eye could see, in front of them, behind them, all around them. Water was streaming off Alex's hair, pouring down in front of his eyes. He could feel it dripping off his chin. His shoes were full of water. His clothes had turned into sodden rags. He wiped his eyes with the back of his arm, then took aim and fired for the first time. The trigger moved easily—the half inch that Gunter had described—but he was shocked by the noise as the bullet detonated, the way the Tokarev recoiled, almost dislocating his wrist. His

bullet slanted uselessly into the air. A woman in a burka stared at him from behind the window of a four-by-four. Her eyes—all he could see of her—were full of outrage. He had been standing close to her when he fired. This was the middle of a city. You couldn't start a gunfight here!

But even if Alex had missed, the shot had an effect. Julius took flight, ducking behind the traffic, trying to find a way of escape. Alex saw him cross from one side of the road to the other, in front of one car, behind another, disappearing behind an open-back truck. There was a park over to one side and next to it a sign advertising the Cairo Zoo. He leapt over the barrier in the middle of the road, past one line of traffic. Perhaps he thought that the trees and bushes would give him shelter.

He was in the outer lane, almost at the grass verge, when the taxi hit him. This was the only lane where the traffic was moving—heading toward the university. The taxi hadn't been doing more than ten miles per hour, but it was enough. It struck Julius on his left thigh and shoulder, sending him spinning into the darkness. Alex saw him fall, then get up again, then fall a second time like a wounded animal. The driver didn't stop. He might not have realized what he'd done. Or he could have seen the gun that Julius was holding. Either way, he didn't want to get involved.

Alex stepped over the barrier and made it over to the other side. Now he was on grass. Was it his imagination or was the rain already thinning out? It had been falling

so heavily that there simply couldn't be much more of it left in the sky. He crossed the pavement and walked onto the lawn. Julius had vanished from sight, but Alex knew he couldn't have gone far. He wasn't walking anymore. He was crawling.

Alex found him stretched out on the grass, next to a flower bed. He was cradling his injured shoulder with the gun lying next to him. He had cut himself badly in the collision with the taxi—there was blood oozing through his shirt. His hair was plastered across his forehead. His eyes were wide and staring. Alex walked up to him and stood looming over him. The traffic was behind them. The university campus and the Assembly Hall were suddenly a long way away. They were on their own.

"Are you going to kill me?" Julius screamed. He didn't sound afraid. His voice was on the edge of hysteria. "Are you going to shoot me?"

Alex said nothing. The Tokarev was at his side, pointing down.

Julius drew a breath. It seemed to Alex that he couldn't have stood up, even if he'd wanted to. "What happened to Gunter?" he asked. "Don't tell me he let you go!"

"Gunter is dead," Alex said.

"And you think you've won? You've saved the boring secretary of state and everyone is going to be all over you? 'Good old Alex has done it again!' But it's not like that, is it?" Julius writhed on the grass. His shoulder might have been dislocated. There was a lot of blood, mixing with the rain. "You're not going to shoot me," he

sniggered. “You can’t shoot me. You don’t have it in you. You’re just a goody-goody. Alex Rider, the reluctant spy. And I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. Very soon the police are going to come and they’ll send me back to prison, but—you know?—prison isn’t that bad. It’s just like being at school. And they can’t keep me there forever. They’ll wait five years or ten years and then they’ll set me free.

“But you’re never going to be free, are you, Alex? Not after what we’ve done to you. We’ve taken away the one thing that mattered to you. We’ve killed your best friend. Do you think she knew what had happened when the bomb went off? Do you think she died at once? You’ll be asking yourself that question for the rest of your life, and from now on you’ll always be on your own. No parents. No friends. No Jack. Nothing.

“And look at you now! I can see how much you hate me . . .”

“You’re wrong,” Alex said. “You’re nothing to me.”

The rain was a mask, hiding his face. His eyes were dark and empty. In his sodden clothes, he was almost a skeleton of himself. He turned and began to walk away.

That was when Julius went for the gun, his hand scrabbling through the wet grass. He lifted it and aimed.

Alex heard him. Some tiny movement. Some instinct. He spun around.

Julius fired a single shot.

But Alex fired first.



SELKET

THE GRAY CHEVROLET SWEEPED into the university campus and pulled up in front of the Assembly Hall. Joe Byrne stepped out into a scene of chaos.

He had been less than half a mile away, at the Four Seasons Hotel, watching the speech on television, when the shot was fired and his evening suddenly became very unpleasant indeed. It was extremely unlikely that an assassin could have slipped into the Assembly Hall with the crowd. It was almost impossible that he or she could have carried a gun. Not if he had done his job properly. His BlackBerry was already buzzing as he stormed out to the waiting car. Of course, the journey had been endless. It would have been faster to walk.

And now here he was in the damp and the darkness, trying to get answers to questions he should never have had to ask. It had stopped raining as suddenly as it had started, but there were still huge puddles everywhere. At least it was a little less hot.

His second-in-command, a man named Brenner, had seen him arrive and came over to him. The man was experienced, a former marine, and he didn't waste any time.

"We have two fatalities, sir. I'm afraid Edwards was shot dead outside the room where the sniper was

concealed. It was some sort of control center high up in the roof. And they've found a TV technician in one of the OBUs. Cause of death is still unclear."

"What about the secretary of state?"

"She's fine, sir. We put the usual protocol into place and got her out of the building, unharmed. She's already back at the embassy, a little shaken up but otherwise okay."

"The weapon?"

"Arctic Warfare sniper rifle. The Egyptians are hanging on to it, sir. Their man's already here."

The Egyptians! Joe Byrne was looking old and tired—as if all the cares of the world had been dumped on his shoulders, which, in a way, they had. If he wasn't careful, this whole thing would disintegrate into a who-did-what spat, with each country blaming the other. An armed assassin had walked past fifteen CIA agents and ten times as many Egyptian security men and police. That meant an awful lot of egg on an awful lot of faces.

As if on cue, a short, dark man with heavy eyes and a mustache drooping all the way down the sides of his chin came striding toward them. Byrne recognized him at once. His name was Ali Manzour and he was the head of Jihaz Amn al Daoula, the Egyptian State Security Service. He was wearing a white striped suit and there were several heavy gold rings on his fingers. Byrne noticed that the Egyptian's clothes were drenched and he wondered if it was the rain. It was just as likely to be sweat. For a man of his size, Manzour was seriously overweight.

Even so, it was good news that he was here. Byrne knew Manzour fairly well. He was smart and efficient. Over a glass of raki he could also be warm and good-humored. But right now, his stress levels were out of control. Even as he approached, he took out a bottle of white tablets and dry-swallowed a handful of them.

“This is a disgrace,” he exploded. “This is an outrage!”

“You told me the building was secure.” Byrne had decided to play it straight down the line. The buck stops here . . . and not with me.

“The building was secure!”

“There was some sort of secret staircase constructed in the walls,” Brenner said. “It led all the way up.”

“I know nothing about this secret staircase!” Manzour exclaimed. “But I am telling you now that this is a British plot. In my opinion, it has all the fingerprints of the British secret service. The gun that the sniper used is of British design. The British did not wish the secretary of state to make this speech. And it is a British citizen who was found in the television van.”

“How do you know that?”

“We have his ID. His name is Erik Gunter. And he does not work for Al Minya. The van had been stolen from them. They know nothing about him.”

Erik Gunter. Byrne’s heart sank. It was the name that Alex had given him. He had given instructions for the man to be kept under surveillance, but somehow he must have slipped through the net. “How did he die?” he asked.

Manzour's eyes bulged almost comically, as if he couldn't believe what he was about to say. "My people say that he was stung by a scorpion. But this is madness. There are no scorpions in Cairo. There are no scorpions in television broadcasting vans." He signaled frantically and a junior officer came running over with a folding chair. He plumped himself down and took out a handkerchief, using it to wipe his brow. It took him a few moments to regain his composure, but when he spoke again it was in a softer voice. "I do not understand any of this. I get the sense of a great conspiracy. Let us give thanks that it does not seem to have worked and that the secretary of state is unharmed."

A soldier appeared, walking hastily toward them. He stopped in front of Manzour, saluted, then bent forward and whispered a few words. Manzour looked up, his face filled with new alarm. "The business becomes even more strange," he said. "I have just been told that a boy has been arrested at the main gate."

"A boy?"

"He was carrying a gun. Russian manufacture. It appears to have been fired. He simply walked up to my men and allowed himself to be taken. He didn't try to resist. And now he is asking for you."

"Where is he?" Suddenly Byrne knew. It couldn't be anyone else. "Can you ask your man to describe him?"

Manzour turned to the soldier and there was a brief exchange of words. "He is a British schoolboy. Aged fif-

teen. Light-colored hair. He was wearing the uniform of one of our international colleges.”

“The Cairo College of Arts and Education?”

“Yes.” Manzour’s eyes narrowed. “You know him?”

“Yes, I do. And it’s absolutely urgent that we speak to him immediately . . . somewhere private.”

Manzour nodded. He stood up, then noticed the soldier, still waiting for instructions. “You heard what he said!” he bellowed. “Fetch the boy. Bring him to me . . . in the director’s office. Nobody is to speak to him. Not even his name! I’ll see him at once.”

It was Alex Rider, of course. It couldn’t have been anyone else. But Joe Byrne was shocked by what he saw. Only a few days had passed since the two of them had met, but in that time the boy seemed to have aged ten years. Alex didn’t seem to be physically hurt. He had walked into the room, an office inside the Assembly Hall, and sat down without limping or showing any obvious sign of injury. He had seemed pleased to see Byrne. But he looked haggard and exhausted. His clothes, soaking wet, hung off a body that was almost broken. The light had gone out in his eyes. It was obvious to Byrne that something terrible had happened. And for the first time in his long career with the CIA, he was almost afraid to ask.

Alex told his story briefly, as if he wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. He explained that he had been kidnapped by a man called Razim and taken to the desert.

There was a conspiracy, put together by Scorpia, to blackmail the British government. An exact look-alike of Alex had entered the Assembly Hall with the party from Cairo College and would have shot the secretary of state if Alex hadn't stopped him.

"A look-alike?" Manzour repeated the words. From the expression on his face, he hadn't believed anything Alex had said.

"Yes. His name is Julius Grief. His father was Dr. Hugo Grief. He had plastic surgery that made him look like me."

"And where is he now?"

"You'll find him on the side of the road leading down from the university."

"Alive?"

"No. I killed him."

Manzour turned to one of his officers and snapped out a command in Arabic. The officer hurried out of the room.

Byrne waited until he had gone. "I don't think you should doubt anything Alex says, Ali," he muttered. "I know him. I've worked with him twice in the past. You can trust him."

The use of his first name signaled something to the Egyptian head of security. He nodded slowly, then turned back to Alex, examining him more carefully. "We found a dead man in an outside broadcast van," he said.

Alex nodded. "That was Erik Gunter. He was part of

it. He was the head of security at Cairo College. But he was also working for Scorpia.”

“He was stung by a scorpion.”

“That’s right.” Alex didn’t offer any explanation.

Byrne leaned forward. “Tell me,” he said. “Where can we find this man . . . Razim?”

“I’ll tell you that,” Alex said. “But there’s a condition. I want to come with you when you take him out.”

Manzour shook his head. “Out of the question. I have men who are experienced in this sort of thing. Unit Triple Seven. They do not need your help.” Unit 777 was the Egyptian counterterrorism and special operations unit. It had gotten its name from the year it was founded—1977. It was based in southern Cairo.

“I think you’ve done enough, Alex,” Byrne agreed. “You can leave this to us.”

Alex shook his head. “Razim is in a fort near the town of Siwa,” he said. “And he has enough firepower to hold back an army. He’s put mines in the sand all around him so even if your men are experienced, they’ll be blown to pieces before they get anywhere near. Razim boasted to me about radar warning systems and surface-to-air missiles. Do you really want to get into a fight with him? If you let me help you, you won’t have to.”

Neither man spoke, so Alex went on.

“There’s a helicopter waiting to take Julius Grief back to the fort. I can show you where it is and you’ll be able to hide twelve of your men inside. If we move fast enough,

we might be able to catch Razim before he's heard what happened here tonight. I can walk right in. He'll think I'm Julius."

"And then?" Manzour was suddenly interested.

"Your men wait in the helicopter. There's a central control room. If I can get in there, I can disable all the machinery in the fort. No power. No missiles. No mines. Then you attack. He still has about twenty or thirty guards, but you'll take them by surprise."

"Everything depends upon your being able to reach this control room," Manzour said.

"It's in an old bakery. I noticed it when I was there. That's the weak spot."

There was a brief silence, then Byrne nodded. "He's right," he said. "The question is—is it too late for a news blackout?"

"The television stations have already broadcast that an attempt was made on the life of your secretary of state," Manzour replied. "But they have not reported if it was successful. I can make sure that they say nothing more tonight. That would give you the time you need."

"So it's agreed?"

There was a movement at the door and the officer whom Manzour had sent out returned, chattering excitedly in Arabic. He was staring at Alex as if he had just seen a ghost. Manzour nodded and dismissed him. "It's true about the other boy," he said. "He's an exact duplicate . . . apart from the bullet hole in his head."

Alex shrugged.

Manzour glanced at Byrne. "What do you think?"

"A joint American-Egyptian operation. It's your country, but it was our politician. Six of your men. Six of mine. Plus Alex, of course."

"I agree. But we must move quickly."

Byrne reached out and put a hand on Alex's shoulder. He had to know. "What did Razim do to you, Alex?" he asked.

He felt Alex flinch, as if the contact was painful to him. He didn't answer Byrne's question. "Razim has an interest in pain," he said. "I think it's time he experienced some." He stood up. "We shouldn't be sitting here talking. We should be on our way. And there is one other thing.

"This time, I want a gun."

The Sikorsky H-34 was waiting exactly where Alex had said it would be, sitting in the darkness beside a half-built office block. The pilot didn't even see them coming. One moment he was sitting in the cockpit, waiting for Erik Gunter and Julius Grief, the next he had been dragged out and found himself spread-eagled on the rubble with a gun pressed into the back of his neck.

A signal was given and four jeeps pulled in. Alex was in the first, sitting next to Joe Byrne. There were a dozen men behind them—all dressed in desert khakis and combat boots and carrying a selection of Heckler & Koch

MP5 submachine guns, grenade launchers, automatic pistols, and enough weaponry to launch a small war. This was the American-Egyptian assault team put together by the two intelligence chiefs. Alex was still in his Cairo College uniform. He had assumed it was what Julius would have been wearing on the return flight.

Jihaz Amn al Daoula, the Egyptian intelligence service, had so far managed to control the night's news. The radio and television news stations had all reported that an attempt had been made on the life of the secretary of state, but it was still unconfirmed whether she had been hurt or not. Of course, there were thousands of witnesses who had actually been there, but most of them were unsure exactly what they had seen and the CIA had quickly put out their own version of events, which had the secretary of state in the hospital in Cairo and the assassin still at large. Razim might wonder why Erik Gunter hadn't reported back. But there was every chance that, in the middle of the desert, he was still in the dark—in every sense.

As Alex climbed out of the jeep, the man in charge of the CIA team came over to him. Alex recognized him. Fair haired, square shouldered, blue eyes . . . it was Lewinsky, the man who had tried to interrogate him in the bell room.

"I guess I owe you an apology," he said, holding out a hand. "I never told you my name. It's Blake Lewinsky. I know now I was way out of line."

"That's all right." Alex shook the hand briefly.

“I hope you don’t think I make a habit out of this, but we need to get some information out of the pilot.”

“What information?”

“He probably has a password, an identification signal—before he lands at Siwa. If we don’t give it, we could get blown out of the sky.”

“Are you going to waterboard him?” Alex asked.

Lewinsky nodded, acknowledging the jibe. “I think Manzour has other ideas,” he said. “But I just thought I’d come over and warn you. It’s not going to be pleasant. You may not want to watch.”

Ali Manzour had gotten out of one of the jeeps and had picked his way across the rubble to the place where the helicopter pilot was waiting. He crouched down and Alex heard a few soft words, spoken in Arabic. There was silence, followed by a sudden scream. Standing next to Alex, Joe Byrne grimaced and looked away.

A moment later, Manzour walked over to them, wiping blood off his hands with his handkerchief. At the same time, two of his men dragged the unfortunate pilot away. “It’s just as well we asked,” he said. “The password is *Selket*. It is certainly appropriate. *Selket* is an ancient Egyptian goddess of death. She is also known as the scorpion goddess.”

“You’re sure he wasn’t lying to you?” Byrne asked.

“He did lie to me.” Manzour folded the handkerchief and put it away. “But then I asked him a second time and he told me the truth.” He turned to Alex. “Everything now depends on you, my friend. But I ask you again, as

the father of two sons, you are quite certain you are prepared for this?"

Alex nodded.

"Then I wish you success."

The twelve men climbed into the helicopter, arranging themselves with the Americans on one side and the Egyptians on the other, like opposing baseball teams. Unit 777 had also provided a pilot to fly them into the desert. Joe Byrne shook hands with Alex. "Take care, Alex," he said. "You look after yourself."

"Don't worry about me," Alex said.

Alex climbed into the helicopter. The blades began to turn, picked up speed, and finally became a blur. The helicopter rose into the air. Byrne was left standing next to Manzour.

"So that is the famous Alex Rider," Manzour muttered.

"That's right," Byrne said.

"It is not my place to say it, but I think that something very bad has happened to that child. Did you see it in his eyes?"

Byrne nodded. He had already put a call in to Alan Blunt in London and the two of them would speak as soon as Alex returned . . . assuming, of course, that he did. Alex had told him not to worry. But he was very worried indeed.

He watched the helicopter until it had disappeared into the night. Then Ali Manzour clapped a hand on his shoulder and the two men returned to the waiting cars.

A PINCH OF SALT

THE HELICOPTER SHUDDERED through the night sky, carrying its load of twelve silent men and one boy. As it reached the edge of Cairo, the streetlights fell away and suddenly it was alone with the stars. Alex was sitting at the very front, closest to the pilot, and looking out through the cockpit window. He was aware of the desert, vast and empty, an infinite blackness below. He slumped back and perhaps he dozed off—there was little difference between being asleep and being awake—with the rotors beating out their progress, hammering in his ears.

And then someone was tapping his arm and he knew that they were there. How much time had passed? It couldn't have been more than half an hour.

Lewinsky stood in front of him and Alex could see the tension in his eyes. This was the moment of truth. The fort with all its defense systems was close by. If the original pilot had lied to them, they were all dead.

The radio crackled into life. A voice rapped out a single sentence, speaking in Arabic. The pilot replied with one word.

“Selket.”

A long pause. They seemed to be hovering in midair, as if they had come to a standstill. Then more instruc-

tions. The pilot visibly relaxed. They had been given clearance to land.

Looking out, Alex could see the fort, illuminated by hundreds of bulbs. The whole place was a hive of activity as Razim prepared to make his getaway. There were men crisscrossing the courtyard, carrying files and boxes out of the various storerooms and loading up the Land Rovers and open-top trucks that were parked in a long line. Nobody was going to be allowed any sleep tonight. Guards were patrolling the parapets and the rope walkway. All four towers were manned. The huge gates were closed and there were more armed men already watching the helicopter as it swept down out of the sky.

And abruptly night became day as two spotlights crashed on, slanting up into the sky from opposite corners of the fort, capturing the helicopter between them. Brilliant light blazed into the cabin. Lewinsky winced, covering his eyes. But the light gave Alex an idea. The helicopter was expected. It was being watched. He knew that Razim would be nervous, wondering about the long silence. Well, he would give him a signal, set his mind at rest.

Alex unbuckled himself and got up. The door of the helicopter was operated by a heavy lever and he pulled it down, then slid the door open, allowing the blast of the engines and the desert heat to come rushing in. One of the CIA men called out to him, but Alex ignored him. He knew what he was doing and he was certain that Razim would be watching. Holding on to a strap that dangled

from the ceiling, he leaned out of the helicopter, into the light, and waved at the fort, grinning as if he had just done something very clever. This was how Julius Grief would have behaved. He wouldn't have waited for the helicopter to land.

Lewinsky understood what he was doing and nodded his approval. Alex gesticulated at the pilot, directing him toward the area of sand that had been hardened to create a safe landing pad. He saw the main gate swing slowly open and a jeep burst out toward them. So far so good. The password had worked and perhaps Alex had been seen. Razim was turning off his defenses, inviting them in. There was a slight jolt as the helicopter touched down. The pilot turned the engine off. Lewinsky got up and came over to him, taking care to keep out of sight.

"We'll give you ten minutes." He still had to shout over the whine of the engine. "Then we're coming in."

Alex nodded.

The Sikorsky had landed about two hundred yards from the gate. Alex jumped down onto the sand and waited for the jeep to arrive. It was being driven by a bearded man in long robes and a headdress. Alex recognized him as the guard who had brought him food on the night he had been captured. He pulled up and Alex got in.

"Where are the others?" the driver asked. He must have been referring to Gunter and the pilot. He couldn't possibly know that there were twelve armed men waiting in the Sikorsky.

“Take me to Razim,” Alex commanded. The driver hesitated. “Now!”

The driver was used to obeying orders. He shoved the gearshift forward and they set off, bouncing across the track. The gates were still open. No one had any idea that anything was wrong. They entered the compound, passing the prison block where Alex and Jack had been held, heading toward Razim’s house. Alex noticed the old bakery that was also the control center. He had hoped that the door would be open, but it was closed—presumably locked—and there were no windows. He could see light showing through the cracks in the wood. There was someone inside. Even now, they might be turning on the mines that surrounded the fort, and if anyone inside the helicopter so much as sneezed, motion and sound detectors would instantly pick them up.

The jeep pulled in. Alex threw open the door and leapt out.

“Julius!”

Razim had come out of his house, a cigarette in his hand, the smoke capturing the glow of the electric lights as it curled upward. He was wearing Western dress—jeans, a loose shirt, and sandals. Perhaps this was part of a new identity, but the round glasses and close-cropped silver hair were unmistakable. The two of them met on the terrace with the stone lion and the terra-cotta pots. This was where they had had breakfast. Razim examined Alex with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance.

“What happened?” he snapped. “I was expecting to hear from you an hour ago.”

So Julius had been given instructions to radio in before he left Cairo. Alex couldn’t have known that.

“She’s dead,” Alex said. He didn’t want to talk too much to begin with. He was afraid of giving himself away.

“The secretary of state is in the hospital. I heard it on the radio. But they didn’t say she was dead.”

“Then they’re lying.” Alex tapped the middle of his forehead with a finger. “I hit her here.”

“And Rider?”

Still acting as Julius, Alex smirked. “He begged for mercy. He was crying at the end. But Gunter let me watch when he killed him, and that’s what I did.”

“Where is Gunter?”

“In the helicopter.”

“Why didn’t he come with you?”

“I don’t know, Razim. What’s the matter? I thought you’d be pleased.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Alex saw the main doors begin to swing shut, the two halves folding toward each other. They moved slowly and he knew it would take them a full minute to close. That gave him a minute to act. He turned his back on Razim and began to saunter away.

“Where are you going?” Razim was uneasy. He might not have guessed who he was really talking to. But there was some inner sense, some instinct that was shouting its warnings. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

“I’m going to bed.”

“We’re not going to bed. We’re leaving.”

“Then I’ll get my things.”

“But that’s not the way to your room!”

And that was what gave him away. Perhaps Julius had been staying in Razim’s house. But Alex was walking in the opposite direction, heading past the well.

“Julius!” Razim called one last time.

Alex didn’t know what to do. Should he just ignore him or turn around and continue to bluff it out? Julius Grief would have been angry. He would have expected rewards and congratulations—not an interrogation. The bakery was right ahead of him. The chimney stood out in all the electric light. There were guards all around, but so far none of them had shown any interest in him.

“Stop him!” The two words came cutting across the courtyard. Almost immediately, Razim repeated them in Arabic. He had guessed what had happened. He knew that he had been tricked. Right in front of Alex, standing between him and the control room, two guards twisted around, untangling their weapons. The gap between the two main doors was narrowing one inch at a time. In half a minute they would meet, cutting Alex off.

He had no choice. He broke into a run, veering around the well and away from the control room. The outer wall was right in front of him with a flight of stone stairs leading up. He took them two at a time. At the same time, his hand came out of his pocket. He was holding the grenade that had been there from the moment he had left the

helicopter. He had already worked the ring loose with his index finger. He heard two shots and almost felt the bullets as they thudded into the steps just behind him. Who was shooting? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore except for finishing this business once and for all. There were guards running toward him from every direction. Everyone was shouting. An alarm had gone off, jangling in the night air. Alex was utterly focused on what he had to do. Two more steps and he reached the top, standing on the parapet with the fort on one side of him, the desert on the other. A third shot whipped past his shoulder. He was horribly exposed. Everything depended on what happened next.

The bakery was below him, but he was on the same level as the chimney, about five yards away. He could see the square opening and could imagine the brickwork running all the way down to the oven. He knew he only had this one chance. There was a second grenade in his other pocket, but he would never get the chance to throw it. How much time did he have left? How long had it been since he had pulled out the pin? He put all the noise out of his head. The shouting, the clang of the alarm, the gunshots. He was back at school. Tossing a Coke can into a bin. Easy. Nothing to it.

He threw the grenade, saw it arc through the air, knew that it was going to find its target, that it couldn't miss.

The grenade disappeared into the chimney without even touching the brickwork.

It took so long for the explosion to happen that Alex

was afraid that something had gone wrong, that the grenade he had been given was faulty. He was just scrabbling for the second one when the blast came. The door of the control room was blown off from inside and a great blast of fire and smoke rushed out into the courtyard. All the lights went out and the darkness of the Sahara threw itself onto the fort like a magician's cloak. Alex threw himself down as a machine gun opened fire, splattering the brickwork behind him. But even as he rolled, he saw that the main gates hadn't quite met, that they were frozen with a gap in between. He knew that Lewinsky and the others would have heard the grenade go off and that they would already be out of the helicopter, crossing the desert. If he could survive for a minute longer, he would no longer be on his own.

His eyes had already gotten used to the darkness. The fort was illuminated by the moon and the stars—but also by the flames coming from the bakery. Alex twisted around and saw Razim coming toward him, already half-way up the staircase. He was holding a gun. His whole body was bathed in a red glow. He had once promised to send Alex to hell and now he looked like the devil himself. There was a crackle of machine-gun fire from the main gate. Somebody screamed. The Egyptians and the American agents had arrived.

But it wasn't over yet. Razim was climbing, closing in on him. Suddenly the night shimmered and white light washed over the parapet as a backup generator kicked in.

Alex was in full sight. He reached behind him and brought out the Tokarev that he had taken from Gunter. It had already served him well and he had demanded it back from Ali Manzour. Somehow it seemed right. It was the only gun Alex had ever called his own. He had wanted it with him at the end.

There were eight rounds in the magazine. Alex fired three of them at Razim, then ran around the side of the parapet, trying to find shadows, somewhere he would be less of a target. He could see one of the towers ahead of him and suddenly there was a guard blocking his path, aiming with his rifle. Alex took out the second grenade and threw it, diving to the floor at the same time. He felt the blast, covering his head with both arms, and when he looked up, the way ahead was clear. He glanced back. The Americans and the Unit 777 men had reached the fort. Alex saw them pouring through the gate, spreading out, and taking up positions across the courtyard. Razim's guards had almost forgotten him. They knew that a far more dangerous enemy had arrived.

Alex got to his feet. He didn't know where to go but he certainly didn't want to stay where he was. He was trapped on the narrow ledge with the edge of the wall on one side and the courtyard on the other. There was shooting all around him. He glimpsed an object flying through the air. It soared through the open door of Razim's house. There was an explosion and the building was torn apart. Two guards had been standing in front of it. There was a

burst of automatic fire and they twisted around, throwing their weapons away from them before collapsing to the ground.

He came to the rope bridge and ran onto it almost without thinking. The other side of the compound looked darker and quieter, and right now all he wanted to do was get out of sight and leave all this to the special forces. He saw three of Razim's men rush past underneath him. They seemed to have given up the fight. They were running away. One of the Americans appeared behind them, wearing night-vision goggles. He stopped, took aim, and picked them off one at a time. Alex realized that the fight was rapidly becoming a massacre. The invaders were better trained and better equipped. They'd had the advantage of surprise. And with all the defenses down, the fort was nothing more than a killing ground. He felt sickened. He wanted this to be over.

And then a voice, surprisingly close to him, spoke two words.

"Don't move."

Alex turned around. It was Razim. Somehow he had caught up with Alex. He was standing with one hand on the side of the bridge, holding on to keep his balance. The other hand held a gun. Alex brought around his own gun. His legs were slightly apart. He could feel himself swaying in the air.

"It's you. I knew it was you. I knew it the moment I saw you." For the first time in his life, Razim felt the full

force of his emotions as they rushed in, overwhelming him. Fury. Bitterness. Despair. He was out of control, unable to believe what had just occurred, that everything he had planned—so carefully, so brilliantly—had been suddenly taken away from him. “What happened? How did you do it?”

Alex didn’t answer. The fight was raging on in the courtyard below them. Some of Razim’s men were still firing, but it seemed to Alex that the CIA and Triple Seven operatives already had the upper hand. Either way, Razim no longer cared. All the blood seemed to have drained out of him. He was staring at Alex with tears in his eyes.

“I beat you!” Razim whimpered. “I crushed you. I killed your friend. And you still came back. Well, this is where it ends, Alex. I will finish you now. Not a slow death. Alas, we have no time. But every death is the same for the one who dies.”

He raised his gun.

“Alex!”

The shout came from below. Blake Lewinsky had seen what was about to happen and reacted immediately, swinging his machine gun around and firing upward. A volley of bullets cut into the bridge between Alex and Razim. Alex lost his balance as the ground gave way beneath his feet. He flailed out, catching his hand on the side, and cursed as he dropped the gun. He saw Lewinsky taking aim a second time. But then someone opened fire from one of the towers and the American spun around, a

bloody stitchwork erupting across his chest. Alex knew he had been killed instantly. But he had done enough.

Razim had fallen back, dazed. His gun had dropped onto the bridge . . . it was right beside him. Alex sprang forward, using all the coiled-up power in his legs. He reached Razim and grabbed hold of him, his hands closing around his throat. The bridge had almost been cut in half, but somehow it was managing to support the two of them, and for a moment they stood there, swaying in midair. There was more gunfire and Alex saw a guard topple out of one of the towers. Razim reached out, trying to retrieve his gun. Alex fell onto him, grabbing his arm, pulling it away.

And then the bridge snapped. Alex felt the gap open up. He could keep hold of Razim and drop with him or he could let go and save himself. At the last microsecond, self-preservation took over. He fell backward, wrapping himself in the severed ropes, twisting them around his arm to tie himself in place. Suddenly his feet were dangling in the air. He felt the strain on his shoulders and wrists. His body weight dragged down the bridge where it had been severed, but the section that was attached to the rooftop held firm, preventing him from hitting the ground.

Razim hadn't been so fortunate. He had been trying to reach the gun and had left it too late to get a handhold. With a last desperate effort he snatched at the ropes, but they had been whipped away and there was nothing to

prevent him falling into the courtyard. If he had hit the ground, he would have broken both his legs, but instead he plunged into the mound of salt that his men had collected from the desert. He went in feetfirst, burying himself up to the waist. His glasses were gone. His gun had landed nearby. He was stuck fast.

All around him, the fighting had stopped. His men were surrendering. The American and Egyptian special forces were taking control.

Razim moved. His eyes widened in fear as he felt himself being sucked into the enormous pile of salt. Alex was dangling above him on his half of the broken bridge. He was out of reach.

“Help me,” Razim said.

Alex didn’t move. If he shifted his weight, the rest of the bridge might collapse.

Razim sank into the salt. It was already up to his armpits. And it was as if he knew what was going to happen, that the game was finally over. Somehow, in the last seconds of his life, he managed to force a smile to his face. To Alex it looked like a hideous grimace. “Please . . . ,” he whimpered. “Help me! Throw me a rope!”

The salt climbed higher.

Razim could feel the pressure crushing his stomach and chest. The salt pile was like some hideous creature, drawing him in, inch by inch, swallowing him alive. “You cheated me!” he screeched. “I was better than you. I should have won!”

Alex did nothing. There was nothing he could do.

With the last of his strength, Razim lunged for the gun, stretching his arm across the surface of the salt pile. His fingertips brushed against it. But he wasn't close enough to pick it up. He gave up the struggle. His arm was dragged beneath the surface. The salt rose over his shoulders. Now only his head and neck were visible, as if he had been decapitated in the fight.

"Don't move, Alex!" One of the CIA men had reached the bridge and was crawling toward Alex. "We're coming to get you."

Alex watched.

Something horrible was happening to Razim. The salt had penetrated his skin, working its way through the pores. It was as if he was being cooked alive inside the huge pile. White foam began to bubble out of his mouth. It trailed out his eyes. Alex was reminded of a garden slug. He had heard it said that slugs died horribly if they were rolled in salt.

"Alex . . ."

It was Razim's last word. His eyes were completely white. He managed to swallow one last breath, as if it would do him any good, and then he was pulled beneath the surface, disappearing altogether. For a brief moment there was a dent in the surface where he had been, then the salt poured in, filling it.

"We've got you!"

Alex felt hands grab hold of him.

The fighting was over. Alex didn't care. He was completely exhausted.

As Alex was helped back down the stone staircase, he saw Arab guards lined up against the wall with their hands over their heads. There were bodies everywhere. Two Americans and a Triple Seven man had been killed, along with Blake Lewinsky. But most of the casualties were Razim's people, lying stretched out in the bloodstained sand.

Someone gave Alex a bottle of water. "Are you okay?" Alex nodded.

"Stay here. We've radioed Cairo. It's over now. There are more people on the way."

But ten minutes later, Alex had disappeared and at first there was panic among the special forces fighters as they searched for him, wondering what had happened. It was only much later that they found him, outside the fort, on his own, kneeling beside a burned-out car.

DEPARTURES

IT WAS TIME TO GO.

Alan Blunt had reached his last day as head of MI6 Special Operations. He had spent the morning packing his personal possessions. It hadn't taken him very long. In fact, they all fit inside a small shoe box that now sat in the middle of his otherwise empty desk. Of course, what he would really be taking from here would be his memories, and he certainly had enough of those. It had briefly occurred to him that he might write a memoir—it was very much the trend with politicians and departing civil servants. But of course it was out of the question. It was part of the job description that he should take his secrets to the grave. And if he tried to sell them, he might arrive there sooner than he had expected.

He took one last look outside. It was going to be a hot summer. Liverpool Street was unusually bright with the sun flaring off the plate glass windows. There was a pigeon half asleep on the ledge outside. Do birds sleep? Blunt tapped on the glass and it flew away. He had once discussed with Smithers the possibility of using homing pigeons to listen in on foreign ambassadors. Homing pigeons with homing devices around one leg. The Covert Weapons Section had put in a feasibility study, but nothing

had come of it. Blunt had seen Smithers a few weeks ago, after his return from Cairo. There had been a formal debriefing. The two of them had not said good-bye.

Blunt went back to his desk and rested a hand on the shoe box. He was tempted to throw it in the garbage. There was nothing inside that he really wanted. Suddenly he just wanted to be out of here. In two days he was leaving for Venice, the first stopping point on a six-week tour of Europe. His wife was coming with him. It would be the longest time the two of them had spent together since the day they were married.

The door opened and Mrs. Jones came in. The new head of Special Operations, just as he had expected. She seemed surprised to see him, but that couldn't be the case, because she had actually asked for a final meeting before he left. For a moment the two of them looked at each other uneasily over the desk. It occurred to Blunt that they should swing around. Her place was behind it now.

He moved back to the window and sat down in an armchair that looked antique but which was actually modern. Like so many things in this building, it wasn't what it seemed. Mrs. Jones perched on the edge of the desk. She was wearing black, a smart suit with a silver chain around her neck. She was sucking one of her peppermints. That was bad news. Blunt knew her habits. She sucked peppermints when she had something unpleasant to say, as if to wipe away the taste of the words.

"Congratulations," Blunt said. He had only been

officially told about her new appointment that day. “I wish you every success.”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Jones nodded briefly. “Have you made plans?”

“Travel. A little golf perhaps. The BBC have asked me to join the board.”

“I know. I recommended you.” She paused, her hands resting on the surface of the desk behind her. “Before you leave, we have to talk about Alex.”

“Yes. I thought that might be on your mind. How is he?”

“I’m afraid he’s not at all well. What do you expect?”

“It was very unfortunate. The loss of that housekeeper of his.”

“Jack Starbright was more than a housekeeper. She was his closest friend. She was the only adult friend he had. Certainly the only adult he could ever trust.”

“Nobody could have foreseen what would happen.”

“Is that really true?” Mrs. Jones walked behind the desk and sat down. She had taken Blunt’s chair, and the message was clear. She was taking his authority too. “Scorpiia set a trap for us and we walked straight into it. Levi Kroll turning up in the River Thames with an iPhone conveniently lodged in his top pocket. A handful of clues leading us to the Cairo International College. They took us for fools and that’s how we behaved. If it hadn’t been for Alex, the secretary of state would be dead and we’d be at war with the Americans. And all this for the Elgin marbles! It almost beggars belief.”

Blunt spread his hands. "I take full responsibility. You don't need to worry. You can start your new job with a clear conscience."

"I wish that were the case. But I agreed to use Alex Rider from the very start . . . and I'm talking now about the Stormbreaker affair more than a year ago. I may have had my doubts about bringing a fourteen-year-old boy into our world, but I ignored them. He was too useful to us. And in that respect, I'm as guilty as you."

Blunt was impressed. There was a quality to his former deputy, a steel in her voice, that he had never noticed before. "How bad is he?" he asked.

"As I'm sure you know, he killed Julius Grief," Mrs. Jones said. "That was something else, by the way. We should never have accepted his supposed death in Gibraltar and I've already given instructions for the whole facility to be shut down. Anyway, Alex had never had a gun before, but this time he used it. He was forced to shoot Julius in cold blood. I don't think he can be blamed. Unfortunately, the effect on him has been traumatic."

She fell silent for a moment. Blunt waited.

"I've talked to the psychologists and they say that for Alex it was almost as if he were killing himself. After all, the two of them were identical. What it boils down to is that part of Alex Rider died with Julius Grief. He shot himself . . . or perhaps a part of himself that should never have been born."

"Maybe that was the part that we created," Blunt suggested.

“Maybe it was. But as far as I’m concerned, the file on Alex Rider is now closed. It was an experiment that we should never have attempted. There’s no point raking over it all now, but we were wrong—both of us. It will never happen again.”

“Is that why you wanted to see me?”

“No. There’s one other thing you have to answer for before you leave. The attack on Alex Rider at Brookland School.” Mrs. Jones waited for Blunt to respond. He said nothing. He showed nothing more than polite interest. She wasn’t surprised. “A gunman was sent to shoot Alex,” she went on. “But curiously, Erik Gunter never mentioned it. Nor did Razim. One might almost think they knew nothing about it. And there are two other questions that have puzzled me. The first one is very simple. Why did the sniper miss? It’s true that Alex noticed him and reacted quickly, but even so, the bullet hit his desk, not his chair. It’s as if the sniper wasn’t aiming at him at all.

“And then there’s the business at the Wandsworth Park industrial estate. Alex overheard the gunman talking to the pilot of the helicopter. “It was fine. Mission accomplished.” That was what he said. Was he lying? Or was he actually telling the truth? Had he achieved what he set out to do?”

“Where are you going with this?” Blunt asked.

“I think you know exactly where I’m going. You recruited the sniper and the helicopter pilot. You arranged the whole thing. Scorpia wanted to lure Alex Rider to

Cairo and they set up the trap. But you had to make sure that he fell into it. If Alex believed he was in danger—worse than that, that his friends might also be in danger too—he would have no choice but to leave. I’ve traced the ownership of the Robinson R22, by the way, so there’s no point denying it.”

“I wouldn’t insult your intelligence by denying it, Mrs. Jones,” Blunt replied.

“What happened to the pilot and the sniper?”

“They survived. They broke a few bones. Nothing serious. They’re both recuperating on the Isle of Man.”

“Do you have any idea how serious this is? You arranged a shooting in a British school! You brought half of London to a standstill and you’ve wasted thousands of hours of police time—and all so you could get your way. And you were wrong all along. Scorpia tricked you.”

Alan Blunt took off his glasses, wiped them with a handkerchief, then put them on again. His eyes were suddenly tired. “Who knows about this?” he asked.

“Only me.”

“And what do you intend to do?”

There was a brief silence.

“Nothing.” Mrs. Jones might have made the decision before she came into the room. Or she might have made it just then. It made no difference. “I can’t separate myself from the responsibility in all this,” she went on. “I can understand why you did what you did. And I won’t stand in the way of your knighthood. So go to Venice. Enjoy

your vacation. We've been together for a very long time. We won't see each other again."

Blunt stood up. He went over to the desk and laid his hands on the shoe box. But he didn't pick it up. He looked straight at Mrs. Jones. "I'll say two things if I may," he said.

"Go ahead."

"Try not to forget that some good came out of all this. I understand that Scorpia has disbanded."

"Scorpia is a laughingstock," Mrs. Jones agreed. "They'll never work again. Several of their personnel—including Zeljan Kurst—have been arrested, and the international police forces are cooperating to track down the rest of them. They took on Alex three times and three times they failed. That was the end of them."

"Well, one might argue that made it all worthwhile."

"One might. What else?"

"Only this. Let me give you some parting advice, Mrs. Jones." Blunt lifted the shoe box. Now the desk was entirely hers. "The Brookland business was a mistake, as it turned out. But I had no hesitation in arranging it. And if you are going to succeed in this job, Mrs. Jones—my job—then there will come a time when you will have to do the same. Of course, you know that. You know the sort of decisions we've had to make. But I wonder if you know what it's like to live with them? A German philosopher once wrote that he who fights monsters must take care that he doesn't become one himself. Our work is often monstrous. I'm afraid there's no escaping it."

Mrs. Jones considered this and nodded. There was nothing more to say.

“Good-bye, Alan.”

“Good-bye, Mrs. Jones.”

Blunt took the shoe box and left the room, closing the door behind him.

“Virgin Airways Flight 20 to San Francisco has begun boarding. Will all passengers please proceed directly to Gate 3.”

Sitting in the Virgin business-class lounge at Heathrow, Edward Pleasure closed the book he had been reading and put it away.

“Time to go,” he said.

“Okay.”

Alex Rider was sitting next to him, dressed in jeans and a dark jersey. He had a carry-on bag for the flight, packed with books and computer games for his Nintendo DSi. He had checked in two other suitcases, and they contained just about everything he now owned. The house in Chelsea had been cleared and was on the market to be sold. Alex had taken his clothes, a few photographs, his tennis racquet, and a soccer ball signed by members of the Chelsea squad that he had once won in a raffle. He could have taken more. Edward had offered to arrange a whole crate to be shipped out. But Alex had preferred to leave it all behind.

He was going to live in San Francisco with Edward and Elizabeth Pleasure—and of course with Sabina. The

two of them had spoken on the phone and she was thrilled he was coming. "It'll be great," she had said. "We'll be together all the time. And you'll love it here, Alex. I know you will. I've already got your room ready for you. And Mum can't wait to see you."

Edward and Elizabeth were now legally responsible for Alex. It was almost as if he had been adopted.

Curiously, it had been Mrs. Jones who had suggested it. Perhaps it had been her way of making up for everything that had happened, but she had called Edward Pleasure even before Alex had arrived back in England. She had sorted out the legal work and had managed to get Alex a full-time visa to stay in America. MI6 had a manor house—part hospital, part rest home—in fifty acres of parkland down in the New Forest, and Alex had stayed there while the arrangements were being made. Edward had finally arrived two days ago. And now they were on their way.

Edward Pleasure worked as a journalist, and following the success of his book about Damian Cray, he was also a wealthy man. He was in big demand in America, writing for several of the major newspapers and magazines. He owed a lot of his success to Alex. After all, it had been Alex who had discovered the truth about Cray in the first place. And Alex had ties with the family that went far beyond his friendship with Sabina. He had stayed with them in Cornwall, in Scotland, and in the south of France—where Edward had nearly died when a bomb

exploded in his house. He walked with a limp and still needed painkillers, but he hadn't let what had happened to him destroy his life. He had a beautiful home in Pacific Heights, a quiet, tree-lined area of the city. Sabina was at the local high school. Her mother cooked and looked after the garden and walked the dog (they had recently taken on a chocolate Labrador) and was writing a book. It had taken them time to get used to life on the other side of the world, but they were comfortable and happy.

And Alex was going to join them, to be part of their family. Edward examined him as the two of them left the lounge and began to walk to the departure gate. He knew very little about what had happened out in Egypt. It wasn't just that Mrs. Jones had been unwilling to tell him. He just didn't want to ask. Jack Starbright was dead. He knew that much and understood what it meant to Alex. He also knew that Alex's spying days really were behind him, that MI6 would never contact them again.

Alex had barely spoken during the time they had been together. There was something terrible about the silence that had taken hold of him like some sort of illness. He showed no interest in food and barely ate. If he was asked something, he would respond politely. But he never volunteered anything and there were long minutes when he didn't seem to be in the room, when his eyes were somewhere else. At their first meeting, it seemed to Edward that something inside Alex had broken and would never be repaired. He even wondered if he was doing the right

thing, taking responsibility for him, bringing him into his home.

But even in the past forty-eight hours he had noticed small differences. Alex was more alert. His pace was quickening as he made his way down the long tunnel that connected with the plane, as if he was in a hurry to be on his way. He had overheard Alex talking to Sabina on the phone and knew that he was looking forward to seeing her.

Was it too much to hope that Alex was already healing? Suddenly Edward was determined. It would all work out. Alex would be part of a family, something that he had never experienced in his entire life. He would be thousands of miles away from the forces that had done so much to damage him and he would leave them far behind. It was a fresh start. He would finally be what he had always wanted to be. An ordinary boy.

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting next to each other with their seat belts fastened. Alex was next to the window, looking out. The plane had reached the start of the runway and was waiting there while the pilots made the final checks.

“Are you feeling all right, Alex?” Edward asked.

Alex nodded. “Yes. I’m fine.”

The engines roared. The plane rolled forward, picking up speed, then rose into the sky.

ALSO BY ANTHONY HOROWITZ

THE ALEX RIDER NOVELS:

Stormbreaker

Point Blank

Skeleton Key

Eagle Strike

Scorpia

Ark Angel

Snakehead

Crocodile Tears

THE DIAMOND BROTHERS MYSTERIES:

The Falcon's Malteser

Public Enemy Number Two

Three of Diamonds

South by Southeast

Horowitz Horror

More Horowitz Horror

Bloody Horowitz

The Devil and His Boy



*"KILL
ALEX
RIDER"*

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

**ANTHONY
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RUSSIAN ROULETTE
ANTHONY
HOROWITZ



For J, N & C – but not L.

Full circle.



PROLOGUE

BEFORE THE KILL

He had chosen the hotel room very carefully.

As he crossed the reception area towards the lifts, he was aware of everyone around him. Two receptionists, one on the phone. A Japanese guest checking in ... from his accent, obviously from Miyazaki in the south. A concierge printing a map for a couple of tourists. A security man, Eastern European, bored, standing by the door. He saw everything. If the lights had suddenly gone out, or if he had closed his eyes, he would have been able to continue forward at exactly the same pace.

Nobody noticed him. It was actually a skill, something he had learned, the art of not being seen. Even the clothes he wore – expensive jeans, a grey cashmere jersey and a loose coat – had been chosen because it made no statement at all. They were well-known brands but he had cut out the labels. In the unlikely event that he was stopped by the police, it would be very difficult for them to know where the outfit had been bought.

He was in his thirties but looked younger. He had fair hair, cut short, and ice-cold eyes with just the faintest trace of blue. He was not large or well built but there was a sort of sleekness about him. He moved like an athlete – perhaps a sprinter approaching the starting blocks – but there was a sense of danger about him, a feeling that you should leave well alone. He carried three credit cards and a driving licence, issued in Swansea, all with the name Matthew Reddy. A police check would have established that he was a personal trainer, that he worked in a London gym and lived in Brixton. None of this was true. His real name was Yassen Gregorovich. He had been a professional assassin for almost half his life.

The hotel was in King's Cross, an area of London with no attractive shops, few decent restaurants and where nobody really stays any longer than they have to. It was called The Traveller and it was part of a chain; comfortable but not too expensive. It was the sort of place that had no regular clients. Most of the guests were passing through

on business and it would be their companies that paid the bill. They drank in the bar. They ate the “full English breakfast” in the brightly lit Beefeater restaurant. But they were too busy to socialize and it was unlikely they would return. Yassen preferred it that way. He could have stayed in central London, in the Ritz or the Dorchester, but he knew that the receptionists there were trained to remember the faces of the people who passed through the revolving doors. Such personal attention was the last thing he wanted.

A CCTV camera watched him as he approached the lifts. He was aware of it, blinking over his left shoulder. The camera was annoying but inevitable. London has more of these devices than any city in Europe, and the police and secret service have access to all of them. Yassen made sure he didn't look up. If you look at a camera, that is when it sees you. He reached the lifts but ignored them, slipping through a fire door that led to the stairs. He would never think of confining himself in a small space, a metal box with doors that he couldn't open, surrounded by strangers. That would be madness. He would have walked fifteen storeys if it had been necessary – and when he reached the top he wouldn't even have been out of breath. Yassen kept himself in superb condition, spending two hours in the gym every day when that luxury was available to him, working out on his own when it wasn't.

His room was on the second floor. He had thoroughly checked the hotel on the Internet before he made his reservation and number 217 was one of just four rooms that exactly met his demands. It was too high up to be reached from the street but low enough for him to jump out of the window if he had to – after shooting out the glass. It was not overlooked. There were other buildings around but any form of surveillance would be difficult. When Yassen went to bed, he never closed the curtains. He liked to see out, to watch for any movement in the street. Every city has a natural rhythm and anything that breaks it – a man lingering on a corner or a car passing the same way twice – might warn him that it was time to leave at once. And he never slept for more than four hours, not even in the most comfortable bed.

A DO NOT DISTURB sign hung in front of him as he turned the

corner and approached the door. Had it been obeyed? Yassen reached into his trouser pocket and took out a small silver device, about the same size and shape as a pen. He pressed one end, covering the handle with a thin spray of diazafluoren – a simple chemical reagent. Quickly, he spun the pen round and pressed the other end, activating a fluorescent light. There were no fingerprints. If anyone had been into the room since he had left, they had wiped the handle clean. He put the pen away, then knelt down and checked the bottom of the door. Earlier in the day, he had placed a single hair across the crack. It was one of the oldest warning signals in the book but that didn't stop it being effective. The hair was still in place. Yassen straightened up and, using his electronic pass key, went in.

It took him less than a minute to ascertain that everything was exactly as he had left it. His briefcase was 4.6 centimetres from the edge of the desk. His suitcase was positioned at a 95 degree angle from the wall. There were no fingerprints on either of the locks. He removed the digital tape recorder that had been clipped magnetically to the side of his service fridge and glanced at the dial. Nothing had been recorded. Nobody had been in. Many people would have found all these precautions annoying and time-consuming but for Yassen they were as much a part of his daily routine as tying his shoelaces or cleaning his teeth.

It was twelve minutes past six when he sat down at the desk and opened his computer, an ordinary Apple MacBook. His password had seventeen digits and he changed it every month. He took off his watch and laid it on the surface beside him. Then he went to eBay, left-clicked on Collectibles and scrolled through Coins. He soon found what he was looking for: a gold coin showing the head of the emperor Caligula with the date AD11. There had been no bids for this particular coin because, as any collector would know, it did not in fact exist. In AD11, the mad Roman emperor, Caligula, had not even been born. The entire website was a fake and looked it. The name of the coin dealer – Mintomatic – had been specially chosen to put off any casual purchaser. Mintomatic was supposedly based in Shanghai and did not have Top-rated Seller status. All the coins it advertised

were either fake or valueless.

Yassen sat quietly until a quarter past six. At exactly the moment that the second hand passed over the twelve on his watch, he pressed the button to place a bid, then entered his User ID – false, of course – and password. Finally, he entered a bid of £2,518.15. The figures were based on the day's date and the exact time. He pressed ENTER and a window opened that had nothing to do with eBay or with Roman coins. Nobody else could have seen it. It would have been impossible to discover where it had originated. The message had been bounced around a dozen countries, travelling through an anonymity network, before it had reached him. This is known as onion routing because of its many layers. It had also passed through an encrypted tunnel, a secure shell, that ensured that only Yassen could read what had been written. If someone had managed to arrive at the same screen by accident, they would have seen only nonsense and within three seconds a virus would have entered their computer and obliterated the motherboard. The Apple computer, however, had been authorized to receive the message and Yassen saw three words:

KILL ALEX RIDER

They were exactly what he had expected.

Yassen had known all along that his employers would insist on punishing the agent who had been involved in the disaster that the Stormbreaker operation had become. He even wondered if he himself might not be made to retire ... permanently, of course. It was simple common sense. If people failed, they were eliminated. There were no second chances. Yassen was lucky in that he had been employed as a subcontractor. He didn't have overall responsibility for what had happened and at the end of the day he couldn't be blamed. On the other hand, they would have to make an example of Alex Rider. It didn't matter that he was just fourteen years old. Tomorrow he would have to die.

Yassen looked at the screen for a few seconds more, then closed the computer. He had never killed a child before but the thought did not particularly trouble him. Alex Rider had made his own choices. He should have been at school, but instead, for whatever reason, he had allowed the Special Operations Division of MI6 to recruit him. From schoolboy to spy. It was certainly unusual – but the truth was, he had been remarkably successful. Beginner's luck, maybe, but he had brought an end to an operation that had been several years in the planning. He was responsible for the deaths of two operatives. He had annoyed some extremely powerful people. He very much deserved the death that was coming his way.

And yet...

Yassen sat where he was with the computer in front of him. Nothing had changed in his expression but there was, perhaps, something flickering deep in his eyes. Outside, the sun was beginning to set, the evening sky turning a hard, unforgiving grey. The streets were full of commuters hurrying home. They weren't just on the other side of a hotel window. They were in another world. Yassen knew that he would never be one of them. Briefly, he closed his eyes. He was thinking about what had happened. About Stormbreaker. How had it

gone so wrong?

From Yassen's point of view, it had been a fairly routine assignment. A Lebanese businessman by the name of Herod Sayle had wanted to buy two hundred litres of a deadly smallpox virus called R5 and he had approached the one organization that might be able to supply it in such huge quantities. That organization was Scorpia. The letters of the name stood for sabotage, corruption, intelligence and assassination, which were its main activities. R5 was a Chinese product, manufactured illegally in a facility near Guiyang, and by chance one of the members of the executive board of Scorpia was Chinese. Dr Three had extensive contacts in East Asia and had used his influence to organize the purchase. It had been Yassen's job to oversee delivery to the UK.

Six weeks ago, he had flown to Hong Kong a few days ahead of the R5, which had been transported in a private plane, a turboprop Xian MA60, from Guiyang. The plan was to load it into a container ship to Rotterdam – disguised as part of a shipment of Luck of the Dragon Chinese beer. Special barrels had been constructed at a warehouse in Kowloon, with reinforced glass containers holding the R5 suspended inside the liquid. There are more than five thousand container ships at sea at any one time and around seventeen million deliveries are made every year. There isn't a customs service in the world that can keep its eye on every cargo and Yassen was confident that the journey would be trouble-free. He'd been given a false passport and papers that identified him as Erik Olsen, a merchant seaman from Copenhagen, and he would travel with the R5 until it reached its destination.

But, as is so often the way, things had not gone as planned. A few days before the barrels were due to leave, Yassen had become aware that the warehouse was under surveillance. He had been lucky. A cigarette being lit behind a window in a building that should have been empty told him all he needed to know. Slipping through Kowloon under cover of darkness, he had identified a team of three agents of the AIVD – the Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst – the Dutch secret service. There must have been a tip-off. The agents

did not know what they were looking for but they were aware that something was on its way to their country and Yassen had been forced to kill all three of them with a silenced Beretta 92, a pistol he particularly favoured because of its accuracy and reliability. Clearly, the R5 could not leave in a container ship after all. A fallback had to be found.

As it happened, there was a Chinese Han class nuclear submarine in Hong Kong going through final repairs before leaving for exercises in the Northern Atlantic. Yassen met the captain in a private club overlooking the harbour and offered him a bribe of two million American dollars to carry the R5 with him when he left. He had informed Scorpia of this decision and they knew that it would dig into their operational profit but there were at least some advantages. Moving the R5 from Rotterdam to the UK would have been difficult and dangerous. Herod Sayle was based in Cornwall with direct access to the coast, so the new approach would make for a much more secure delivery.

Two weeks later, on a crisp, cloudless night in April, the submarine surfaced off the Cornish coast. Yassen, still using the identity of Erik Olsen, had travelled with it. He had quite enjoyed the experience of cruising silently through the depths of the ocean, sealed in a metal tube. The Chinese crew had been ordered not to speak to him on any account and that suited him too. It was only when he climbed onto dry land that he once again took command, overseeing the transfer of the virus and other supplies that Herod Sayle had ordered. The work had to be done swiftly. The captain of the submarine had insisted that he would wait no more than thirty minutes. He might have two million dollars in a Swiss bank account but he had no wish to provoke an international incident ... which would certainly have been followed by his own court martial and execution.

Thirty guards had helped carry the various boxes to the waiting trucks, scrambling along the shoreline in the light of a perfect half-moon, the submarine looking somehow fantastic and out of place, half submerged in the slate-grey water of the English Channel. And almost from the start, Yassen had known something was wrong. He

was being watched. He was sure of it. Some might call it a sort of animal instinct but for Yassen it was simpler than that. He had been active in the field for many years. During that time, he had been in danger almost constantly. It had been necessary to fine-tune all his senses simply to survive. And although he hadn't seen or heard anything, a silent voice was screaming at him that there was someone hiding about twenty metres away, behind a cluster of boulders on the edge of the beach.

He had been on the point of investigating when one of Sayle's men, standing on the wooden jetty, had dropped one of the boxes. The sound of metal hitting wood shattered the calm of the night and Yassen spun on his heel, everything else forgotten. There was limited space on the submarine and so the R5 had been transferred from the beer barrels to less-protective aluminium boxes. Yassen knew that if the glass vial inside had been shattered, if the rubber seal had been compromised, everyone on the beach would be dead before the sun had risen.

He sprinted forward, crouching down to inspect the damage. There was a slight dent in one side of the box. But the seal had held.

The guard looked at him with a sickly smile. He was quite a lot older than Yassen, probably an ex-convict recruited from a local prison. And he was scared. He tried to make light of it. "I won't do that again!" he said.

"No," Yassen replied. "You won't." The Beretta was already in his hand. He shot the man in the chest, propelling him backwards into the darkness and the sea below. It had been necessary to set an example. There would be no further clumsiness that night.

Sitting in the hotel with the computer in front of him, Yassen remembered the moment. He was almost certain now that it had been Alex Rider behind the boulder and if it hadn't been for the accident, he would have been discovered there and then. Alex had infiltrated Sayle Enterprises, pretending to be the winner of a magazine competition. Somehow he had slipped out of his room, evading the guards and the searchlights, and had joined the convoy making its way down to the beach. There could be no other explanation. Later

on, Alex had followed Herod Sayle to London. He had already been responsible for the deaths of two of Sayle's associates – Nadia Vole and the disfigured servant Mr Grin – despite little training and no experience. This was his first mission. Even so, he had single-handedly smashed the Stormbreaker operation. Sayle had been lucky to escape, a few steps ahead of the police.

KILL ALEX RIDER

It was what he deserved. Alex had interfered with a Scorpia assignment and he would have cost the organization at least five million pounds ... the final payment owed by Herod Sayle. Worse than that, he would have damaged their international reputation. The lesson had to be learnt.

There was a knock at the door. Yassen had ordered room service. It wasn't just easier to eat inside the hotel, it was safer. Why make himself a target when he didn't need to?

"Leave it outside," he called out. He spoke English with no trace of a Russian accent. He spoke French, German and Arabic equally well.

The room was almost dark now. Yassen's dinner sat on a tray in the corridor, rapidly getting cold. But still he did not move away from the desk and the computer in front of him. He would kill Alex Rider tomorrow morning. There was no question of his disobeying orders. It didn't matter that the two of them were linked, that they were connected in a way Alex couldn't possibly know.

John Rider. Alex's father.

Their code names. Hunter and Cossack.

Yassen couldn't help himself. He reached into his pocket and took out a car key, the sort that had two remote control buttons to open and close the doors. But this key did not belong to any car. Yassen pressed the OPEN button twice and the CLOSE button three times and a concealed memory stick sprang out onto the palm of his hand. He glanced at it briefly. He knew that it was madness to carry it. He had been tempted to destroy it many times. But every man has his weakness and this was his. He opened the computer again and inserted it.

The file required another password. He keyed it in. And there it was on the screen in front of him, not in English letters but in Cyrillic, the Russian alphabet.

His personal diary. The story of his life.

He sat back and began to read.

ДОМА

“Yasha! We’ve run out of water. Go to the well!”

I can still hear my mother calling to me and it is strange to think of myself as a fourteen-year-old boy, a single child, growing up in a village six hundred miles from Moscow. I can see myself, stick-thin with long, fair hair and blue eyes that always look a little startled. Everyone tells me that I am small for my age and they urge me to eat more protein ... as if I can ever get my hands on anything that resembles fresh meat or fish. I have not yet spent many hundreds of hours working out and my muscles are undeveloped. I am sprawled out in the living room, watching the only television we have in the house. It’s a huge, ugly box with a picture that often wavers and trembles and there are hardly any channels to choose from. To make things worse, the electricity supply is unreliable and you can be fairly sure that the moment you get interested in a film or a news programme, the image will suddenly flicker and die and you’ll be left alone, sitting in the dark. But whenever I can, I tune into a documentary, which I devour. It is my only window onto the outside world.

I am describing Russia – about ten years before the end of the twentieth century. It is not so long ago and yet it is already somewhere that no longer exists. The changes that began in the main cities became a tsunami that engulfed the entire country, although they took their time reaching the village where I lived. There was no running water in any of the houses and so, three times a day, I had to make my way down to the well with a wooden harness over my shoulders and two metal buckets dragging down my arms. I sound like a peasant and a lot of the time I must have looked like one, dressed in a baggy shirt with no collar and a waistcoat. As a matter of fact, I had one pair of American jeans, which had been sent to me as a

present from a relative in Moscow, and I can still remember everyone staring at me when I put them on. Jeans! They were like something from a distant planet. And my name was Yasha, not Yassen. Quite by accident, it got changed.

If I am going to explain what happened to me and what I became, then I must begin here, in Estrov. Nobody speaks of it any more. It is not on the map. According to the Russian authorities, it never existed. But I remember it well; a village of about eighty wooden houses surrounded by farmland with a church, a shop, a police station, a bathhouse and a river that was bright blue in the summer but freezing all year round. A single road ran through the middle of the village but it was hardly needed, as there were very few cars. Our neighbour, Mr Vladimov, had a tractor which often rumbled past, billowing oily, black smoke, but I was more used to being woken up by the sound of horses' hooves. The village was wedged between thick forest in the north and hills to the south and west so that the view never really changed. Sometimes I would see planes flying overhead and I thought of the people inside them, travelling to the other side of the world. If I was working in the garden, I would stand still and watch them – the wings blinking, the sunlight glinting on their metal skin – until they had gone out of sight, leaving only the echo of their engines behind. They reminded of me who and what I was. Estrov was my world and I certainly didn't need an aeroplane to get from one side to the other.

My own home, where I lived with my parents, was small and simple, made of painted wooden boards with shutters on either side of the windows and a weather vane that squeaked all night if there was too much wind. It was quite close to the church, set back from the main road with similar houses on either side. Flowers and brambles grew right beside the walls and were slowly creeping towards the roof. There were just four rooms. My parents slept upstairs. I had a room at the back but I had to share it whenever anyone came to stay. My grandmother, who lived with us, had the room next to mine but she preferred to sleep in a sort of hole in the wall, above the stove, in the kitchen. She was a very small, dark brown woman and when I was young, I used to think that she had

been cooked by the flames.

There was no railway station in Estrov. It was not considered important enough. Nor was there a bus service or anything like that. I went to school in a slightly larger village that liked to think of itself as a town, two miles away down a track that was dusty and full of potholes in the summer, and thick with mud or covered in snow during the winter. The town was called Rosna. I walked there every day, no matter what the weather, and I was beaten if I was late. My school was a big, square, brick building on three floors. All the classrooms were the same size. There were about five hundred children in all, boys and girls. Some of them travelled in by train, pouring out onto the platform with eyes that were still half-closed with sleep. Rosna did have a railway station and they were very proud of it, decking it with flowers on public holidays. But actually it was a mean, run-down little place and nine out of ten trains didn't even bother to stop there.

We students were all very smart. The girls wore black dresses with green aprons and had their hair tied back with ribbons. The boys looked like little soldiers, with grey uniforms and red scarves tied around our neck, and if we did well with our studies, we were given badges with slogans – “For Active Work”, “School Leader”, that sort of thing. I don't really remember much of what I learned at school. Who does? History was important ... the history of Russia, of course. We were always learning poems by heart and had to recite them, standing to attention beside our desks. There was maths and science. Most of the teachers were women but our headmaster was a man called Lavrov and he had a furious temper. He was short but he had huge shoulders and long arms, and I would often see him pick up a boy by the throat and pin him against the wall.

“You're not doing well, Leo Tretyakov!” he would boom. “I'm sick of the sight of you. Buck up your ideas or get out of here!”

Even the teachers were terrified of him. But actually, he was a good man at heart. In Russia, we were brought up to respect our teachers and it never occurred to me that his titanic rages were anything unusual.

I was very happy at school and I did well. We had a star system – every two weeks the teachers gave us a grade – and I was always a five-star student, what we called a *pyatiorka*. My best subjects were physics and maths, and these were very important to the Russian authorities. Nobody ever let you forget that we were the country that had sent the first man – Yuri Gargarin – into space. There was even a photograph of him in the front entrance and you were supposed to salute him as you came in. I was also good at sport and I remember how the girls in my class used to come along and cheer me when I scored a goal. I wasn't all that interested in girls at this time, which is to say I was happy to chat to them but I didn't particularly want to hang out with them after school. My best friend was the Leo that I just mentioned and the two of us were inseparable.

Leo Tretyakov was short and skinny with jutting out ears, freckles and ginger hair. He used to joke that he was the ugliest boy in the district and I found it hard to disagree. He was also far from bright. He was a two-star student, a dismal *dvoyka* and he was always getting into trouble with the teachers. In the end they actually gave up punishing him because it didn't seem to make any difference and he just sat there quietly daydreaming at the back of the class. But at the same time he was the star of our NVP – military training – classes which were compulsory throughout the school. Leo could strip down an AK47 automatic machine gun in twelve seconds and reassemble it in fifteen. He was a great shot. And twice a year there were military games, when we had to compete with other schools using a map and a compass to find our way through the woods. Leo was always in charge. And we always won.

I liked Leo because he was afraid of nothing and he always made me laugh. We did everything together. We would eat our sandwiches in the yard, washed down with a gulp of vodka that he had stolen from home and brought to school in one of his mother's old perfume bottles. We smoked cigarettes in the woodland close to the main building, coughing horribly because the tobacco was so rough. Our school toilets had no compartments and we often sat next to each other doing what we had to do, which may sound disgusting but that

was the way it was. You were meant to bring your own toilet paper too, but Leo always forgot and I would watch him guiltily tearing pages out of his exercise books. He was always losing his homework that way. But with Leo's homework – and he'd have been the first to admit it – that was probably all it was worth.

The best time we had together was in the summer, when we would go for endless bicycle rides, rattling along the country roads, shooting down hills and pedalling backwards furiously, which was the only way to stop. Everyone had exactly the same model of bicycle and they were all death traps with no suspension, no lights and no brakes. We had nowhere to go but in a way that was the fun of it. We used our imagination to create a world of wolves and vampires, ghosts and Cossack warriors – and we chased each other right through the middle of them. When we finally got back to the village, we would swim in the river, even though there were parasites in the water that could make you sick, and we always went to the bathhouse together, thrashing each other with birch leaves in the steam room which was meant to be good for your skin.

Leo's parents worked in the same factory as mine, although my father, who had once studied at Moscow State University, was the more senior of the two. The factory employed about two hundred people, who were collected by coaches from Estrov, Rosna and lots of other places. I have to say, the place was a source of constant puzzlement to me. Why was it tucked away in the middle of nowhere? Why had I never seen it? There was a barbed wire fence surrounding it and armed militia standing at the gate, and that didn't make sense either. All it produced was pesticides and other chemicals used by farmers. But when I asked my parents about it, they always changed the subject. Leo's father was the transportation manager, in charge of the coaches. My father was a research chemist. My mother worked in the main office doing paperwork. That was about as much as I knew.

At the end of a summer afternoon, Leo and I would often sit close to the river and we would talk about our future. The truth was that just about everyone wanted to leave Estrov. Outside work, there was

nothing to do and half the people who lived there were perpetually drunk. I'm not making it up. During the winter months, they weren't allowed to open the village shop before ten o'clock in the morning or people would rush in as soon as it was light to buy their vodka; and during December and January, it wasn't unusual to see some of the local farmers flat on their backs, half covered with snow and probably half dead too after downing a whole bottle. We were all being left behind in a fast-changing world. Why my parents had ever chosen to come here was another mystery.

Leo didn't care if he ended up working in the factory like everyone else but I had other ambitions. For reasons that I couldn't explain, I'd always thought that I was different from everyone else. Maybe it was the fact that my father had once been a professor in a big university and that he had himself experienced life outside the village. But when I was watching those planes disappear into the distance, I always thought they were trying to tell me something. I could be on one of them. There was a whole life outside Estrov that I might one day explore.

Although I had never told anyone else except Leo, I dreamt of becoming a helicopter pilot – maybe in the army but if not, in air-sea rescue. I had seen a programme about it on television and for some reason it had caught hold of my imagination. I devoured everything I could about helicopters. I borrowed books from the school library. I cut out articles in magazines. By the time I was thirteen, I knew the name of almost every moving part of a helicopter. I knew how it used all the different forces and controls, working in opposition to each other to fly. The only thing I had never done was sit in one.

“Do you think you'll ever leave?” Leo asked me one evening, the two of us sprawled out in the long grass, sharing a cigarette. “Go and live in a city with your own flat and a car?”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“You're clever. You can go to Moscow. Learn how to become a pilot.”

I shook my head. Leo was my best friend. Whatever I might secretly think, I would never talk about the two of us being apart. “I don't

think my parents would let me. Anyway, why would I want to leave? This is my home.”

“Estrov is a dump.”

“No, it’s not.” I looked at the river, the fast-flowing water chasing over the rocks, the surrounding woodland, the muddy track that led through the centre of the village. In the distance, I could see the steeple of St Nicholas. The village had no priest. The church was closed; but its shadow stretched out almost to our front door and I had always thought of it as part of my childhood. Maybe Leo was right. There wasn’t very much to the place, but even so, it was my home. “I’m happy here,” I said and at that moment I believed it. “It’s not such a bad place.”

I remember saying those words. I can still smell the smoke coming from a bonfire somewhere on the other side of the village. I can hear the water rippling. I see Leo, twirling a piece of grass between his fingers. Our bicycles are lying, one on top of the other. There are a few puffs of cloud in the sky, floating lazily past. A fish suddenly breaks the surface of the river and I see its scales glimmer silver in the sunlight. It is a warm afternoon at the start of October. And in twenty-four hours everything will have changed. Estrov will no longer exist.

When I got home, my mother was already making the dinner. Food was a constant subject of conversation in our village because there was so little of it and everyone grew their own. We were lucky. As well as a vegetable patch, we had a dozen chickens, which were all good layers so (unless the neighbours crept in and stole them) we always had plenty of eggs. She was making a stew with potatoes, turnips and tinned tomatoes that had turned up the week before in the shop and that had sold out instantly. It was exactly the same meal as we’d had the night before. She would serve it with slabs of black bread and, of course, small tumblers of vodka. I had been drinking vodka since I was nine years old.

My mother was a slender woman with bright blue eyes and hair which must have once been as blond as mine but which was already grey, even though she was only in her thirties. She wore it tied back

so that I could see the curve of her neck. She was always pleased to see me and she always took my side. There was that time, for example, when Leo and I were almost arrested for letting off bombs outside the police station. We had got up at first light and dug holes in the ground which we'd filled up with drawing pins and the gunpowder stripped from about five hundred matches. Then we'd sneaked behind the wall of the churchyard and watched. It was two hours before the first police car drove over our booby trap and set it off. There was a bang. The front tyre was shredded and the car lost control and drove through a bush. The two of us nearly died laughing, but I wasn't so happy when I got home and found Yelchin, the police chief, in my front room. He asked me where I'd been and when I said I'd been running an errand for my mother, she backed me up, even though she knew I was lying. Later on, she scolded me but I know that she was secretly amused.

In our household, my mother and my grandmother did most of the talking. My father was a very thoughtful man who looked exactly like the scientist that he was, with greying hair, a serious sort of face and glasses. He lived in Estrov but his heart was still in Moscow. He kept all his old books around him and when letters came from the city, he would disappear to read them and at dinner he would be miles away. Why did I never question him more? I ask myself that now but I suppose nobody ever does. When you are young, you accept your parents for what they are and you believe the stories they tell you.

Conversation at dinner was often difficult because my parents didn't like to discuss their work at the factory and there was only so much I could tell them about my day at school. As for my grandmother, she had somehow got stuck in the past, twenty years ago, and much of what she said didn't connect with reality at all. But that night was different. Apparently there had been an accident, a fire at the factory ... nothing serious. My father was worried and for once he spoke his mind.

"It's these new investors," he said. "All they think about is money. They want to increase production and to hell with safety measures. Today it was just the generator plant. But suppose it had been one of

the laboratories?”

“You should talk to them,” my mother said.

“They won’t listen to me. They’re pulling the strings from Moscow and they’ve got no idea.” He threw back his vodka and swallowed it in one gulp. “That’s the new Russia for you, Eva. We all get wiped out and as long as they get their cheque, they don’t give a damn.”

This all struck me as insane. There couldn’t be any real danger, not here in Estrov. How could the production of fertilizers and pesticides do anyone any harm?

My mother seemed to agree. “You worry too much,” she said.

“We should never have gone along with this. We should never have been part of it.” My father refilled his glass. He didn’t drink as much as a lot of the people in the village but, like them, he used vodka to draw down the shutters between him and the rest of the world. “The sooner we get out of here, the better. We’ve been here long enough.”

“The swans are back,” my grandmother said. “They’re so beautiful at this time of the year.”

There were no swans in the village. As far as I knew, there never had been.

“Are we really going to leave?” I asked. “Can we go and live in Moscow?”

My mother reached out and put her hand on mine. “Maybe one day, Yasha. And you can go to university, just like your father. But you have to work hard...”

The next day was a Sunday and I had no school. On the other hand, the factory never closed and both my parents had drawn the weekend shift, working until four and leaving me to clean the house and take my grandmother her lunch. Leo looked in after breakfast but we both had a lot of homework, so we agreed to meet down at the river at six and perhaps kick a ball around with some other boys. Just before midday I was lying on my bed, trying to plough my way through a chapter of *Crime and Punishment*, which was this huge Russian masterpiece we were all supposed to read. As Leo had said to me, none of us knew what our crime was, but reading the book was certainly a punishment. The story had begun with a murder but since

then nothing had happened and there were about six hundred pages to go.

Anyway, I was lying there with my head close to the window, allowing the sun to slant in onto the pages. It was a very quiet morning. Even the chickens seemed to have abandoned their usual clucking and I was aware of only the ticks of the watch on my left wrist. It was a Pobeda with black numerals on a white face and fifteen jewels that had been made just after the Second World War and that had once belonged to my grandfather. I never took it off and over the years it had become part of me. I glanced at it and noticed the time: five minutes past twelve. And that was when I heard the explosion. Actually, I wasn't even sure it was an explosion. It sounded more like a paper bag being crumpled somewhere out of sight. I climbed off the bed and went and looked out of the open window. A few people were walking across the fields but otherwise there was nothing to see. I returned to the book. How could I have so quickly forgotten my parents' conversation from the night before?

I read another thirty pages. I suppose half an hour must have passed. And then I heard another sound – soft and far away but unmistakable all the same. It was gunfire, the sound of an automatic weapon being emptied. That was impossible. People went hunting in the woods sometimes, but not with machine guns, and there had never been any army exercises in the area. I looked out of the window a second time and saw smoke rising into the air on the other side of the hills to the south of Estrov. That was when I knew that none of this was my imagination. Something had happened. The smoke was coming from the factory.

I leapt off the bed, dropping the book, and ran down the stairs and out of the house. The village was completely deserted. Our chickens were strutting around on the front lawn of our house, pecking at the grass. There was a dog barking somewhere. Everything was ridiculously normal. But then I heard footsteps and looked up. Mr Vladimov, our neighbour, was running down from his front door, wiping his hands on a cloth.

“Mr Vladimov!” I called out to him. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know,” he wheezed back. He had probably been working on his tractor. He was covered in oil. “They’ve all gone to see. I’m going with them.”

“What do you mean ... all of them?”

“The whole village! There’s been some sort of accident!”

Before I could ask any more, he had disappeared down the muddy track.

He had no sooner gone than the alarm went off. It was extraordinary, deafening, like nothing I had ever heard before. It couldn’t have been more urgent if war had broken out. And as the noise of it resounded in my head, I realized that it had to be coming from the factory, more than a mile away! How could it be so loud? Even the fire alarm at school had been nothing like this. It was a high-pitched siren that seemed to spread out from a single point until it was everywhere – behind the forest, over the hills, in the sky – and yet at the same time it was right next to me, in front of my house. I knew now that there had been another accident. I had heard it, of course, the explosion. But that had been half an hour ago. Why had they been so slow to raise the alarm?

The siren stopped. And in the sudden silence, the countryside, the village where I had spent my entire life, seemed to have become photographs of themselves and it was as if I was on the outside looking in. There was nobody around me. The dog had stopped barking. The chickens had scattered.

I heard the sound of an engine. A car came hurtling towards me, bumping over the track. The first thing I registered was that it was a black Lada. Then I took in the bullet holes all over the bodywork and the fact that the front windscreen was shattered. But it was only when it stopped that I saw the shocking truth.

My father was in the front seat. My mother was behind the wheel.

КРОКОДИЛЫ

CROCODILES

I didn't even know my mother could drive. We hardly ever saw any cars in Estrov because nobody could afford to buy one, and anyway, there wasn't anywhere to go. The black Lada probably belonged to one of the senior managers.

Not that I was thinking about these things just then. The driver's door opened and my mother got out. Straight away, I saw the fear in her eyes. She raised a hand in my direction, urging me to stay where I was, then ran round to the other side and helped my father out. He was wearing a loose white coat that flapped over his normal clothes, and I saw with a sense of horror that was like a pool of black water, sucking me in, that he had been hurt. The fabric was covered with his blood. His left arm hung limp. He was clutching his chest with his right hand. His face looked thin and pale and his eyes were empty, clouded by pain. My mother had her arm around him, helping him to walk. She at least had not been hurt but she still looked like someone who had escaped from a war zone. There were streaks running down her face. Her hair was wild. No boy should ever see his parents in this way. It is not natural. Everything I had always believed and taken for granted was instantly smashed.

The two of them reached me. My father could go no further and sank to the ground, resting his back against our garden fence. And all the time I had said nothing. There were a million questions I wanted to ask but the words simply would not reach my lips. Time seemed to have fragmented. The first explosion, the gunfire and the smoke, going downstairs, seeing the car ... they were like four separate incidents that could have taken place years apart. I needed them to explain it for me. Somehow, perhaps, they could make it all make sense.

"Yasha!" My father was the first to speak and it didn't sound like

him at all. The pain was distorting his voice.

“What’s happened? What is it? Who hurt you? You’ve been shot!” Once I had begun to speak I could barely stop, but I was making little sense.

My father reached out and grabbed hold of my arm. “I am so glad you’re here. I was afraid you’d be out of the house. But you have to listen to us very carefully, Yasha. We have very little time.”

“Yasha, my dear boy...” It was my mother who had spoken and suddenly there were tears coursing down her cheeks. It didn’t matter what had happened at the factory. It was seeing me that had made her cry.

“I will try to explain to you,” my father said. “But you can’t argue with me. Do you understand that? You have to leave the village immediately.”

“What? I’m not leaving! I’m not going anywhere.”

“You have no choice. If you stay here, they’ll kill you.” His grip on me tightened. “They’re already on their way. Do you understand? They’ll be here. Very soon.”

“Who? Why?”

My father was too weak, in too much pain to say anything more, so my mother took over.

“We never told you about the factory,” she said. “We weren’t allowed to. But it wasn’t just that. We didn’t want you to know. We were ashamed.” She wiped her eyes, pulling herself together. “We were making chemicals and pesticides for farmers, like we always said. But we were also making other things. For the military.”

“Weapons,” my father said. “Chemical weapons. Do you understand what I mean?” I said nothing so he went on. “We had no choice, Yasha. Your mother and I got into trouble with the authorities a long time ago, when we were in Moscow, and we were sent out here. That was before you were born. It was all my fault. They stopped us from teaching. They threatened us. We had to earn a living and there was no other way.”

The words were like a stampede of horses galloping through my head. I wanted them to stop, to slow down. Surely all that mattered

was to get help for my father. The nearest hospital was miles away but there was a doctor in Rosna. It seemed to me that my father was getting weaker and that the blood was spreading.

But still they went on. "This morning there was an accident in the main laboratory," my mother explained. "And something was released into the air. We had already warned them it might happen. You heard us talking about it only last night. But they wouldn't listen. Making a profit was all that mattered to them. Well, it's over now. The whole village has been contaminated. We have been contaminated. We brought it with us in that car. Not that it would have made any difference. It's in the air. It's everywhere."

"What is? What are you talking about?"

"A form of anthrax." My mother spat out the words. "It's a sort of bacterium but it's been modified so that it's very contagious and acts very quickly. It could wipe out an army! And maybe we deserve this. We were responsible. We helped to make it..."

"Do it!" my father said. "Do it now!" With his free hand, he fumbled in his pocket and took out a metal box, about fifteen centimetres long. It was the sort of thing that might contain a pen.

My mother took it. Her eyes were still fixed on me. "As soon as we knew what had happened, our first thoughts were for you," she said. "Nobody was allowed to leave the factory. That was the protocol. They had to keep us there, to contain us. But your father and I had already made plans ... just in case. We stole a car and we smashed through the perimeter fence. We had to reach you."

"The siren...?"

"That was nothing to do with the accident. They set it off afterwards. They saw we were trying to escape." She drew a breath. "The guards fired machine guns at us and they sounded the alarm. Your father was hit. We were so frightened we wouldn't be able to find you, that you wouldn't be at the house..."

"Thank God you're here!" my father said. He was still holding onto me. He was breathing with difficulty.

My mother opened the box. I didn't know what would be inside or why it was so important but when I looked down, I saw that it

contained the last thing I had expected. There was some grey velvet padding and in the middle of that, a hypodermic syringe.

“For every weapon there has to be a defence,” my mother went on. “We made a poison but we were also working on an antidote. This is it, Yasha. There was only a tiny amount of it but we stole it and we brought it to you. It will protect you...”

“No. I don’t want it! You have it!”

“There isn’t enough for us. This is all we have.” My father’s hand had tightened on my arm, pinning me down. He was using the very last of his strength. “Do it, Eva,” he insisted.

My mother was holding the syringe up to the light, tapping it with her finger, examining the glass vial. She pressed the plunger with her thumb so that a bead of liquid appeared at the end of the needle. I began to struggle. I couldn’t believe that she was about to inject me.

My father wouldn’t let me move. As weak as he was, he kept me still while my mother closed in on me. It must be every child’s nightmare to be attacked by his own parents and at that moment I forgot that everything they were doing was for my own good. They were saving me, not killing me, but that wasn’t how it seemed to me. I can still see my mother’s face, the cold determination as she brought the needle plunging down. She didn’t even bother to roll up my shirt sleeve. The point went through the material and into my arm. It hurt. I think I actually felt the liquid, the antidote, coursing into my bloodstream. She pulled out the needle and dropped the empty hypodermic onto the ground. I looked down and saw more blood, my own, forming a circle on my sleeve.

My father let go of me. My mother closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she was smiling. “Yasha, my dearest,” she said. “We don’t mind what happens to us. Can you understand that? Right now, you’re all we care about. You’re all that matters.”

The three of us stood there for a moment. We were like actors in a play who had run out of lines. We were breathless, shocked by the violence of what had taken place. It was like being in some sort of waking dream. We were surrounded by silence. Smoke was still rising slowly above the hills. And the village was still completely empty.

There was nobody in sight.

It was my father who began again. “You have to go into the house,” he said. “You need to take some clothes with you and any food you can find. Look in the kitchen cupboard and put it all in your backpack. Get a torch and a compass. But, most important of all, there is a metal box in the kitchen. You know where it is ... beside the fire. Bring it out to me.” I hesitated so he went on, putting all his authority into his voice. “If you are not out of the village in five minutes, Yasha, you will die with us. Even with the antidote. The government will not allow anyone to tell what has happened here. They will hunt you down and they will kill you. If you want to live, you must do as we say.”

Did I want to live? Right then, I wasn't even sure. But I knew that I couldn't let my parents down, not after everything they had done to reach me. Not daring to speak, my mother silently implored me. I could feel my throat burning – I reeled away and staggered into the house. My father was still sitting on the ground with his legs stretched out in front of him. Looking back, I saw my mother go over and kneel beside him.

Almost tripping over myself, I ran across the garden and through the front door. I went straight up to my bedroom and, in a daze, pulled out the uniform I had worn on camping trips with the Young Pioneers, our Russian scouting organization. I had been given a dark green anorak and waterproof trousers. I wasn't sure whether to carry them or to wear them, but in the end I pulled them on over my ordinary clothes. I quickly put on my leather boots, which were still covered in dried mud and took my backpack, a torch and a compass from under the bed. I looked around me, at the pictures on the wall – a football club, various helicopters, a photograph of the world taken from outer space. The book that I had been reading was on the floor. My school clothes were folded on a chair. I could not accept that I was leaving all this behind, that I would never see any of it again.

I went downstairs. Every house in the village had its own special hiding place and ours was in the wall beside the stove. There were two loose bricks and I pulled them out to reveal a hollow opening

with a tin box inside. I grabbed it and took it with me. As I straightened up, I noticed my grandmother, still standing at the sink, peeling potatoes, with her apron tied tightly around her waist.

She beamed at me. "I can't remember when there's been a better harvest," she said. She had absolutely no idea what was going on.

I went over to a cupboard and shoved some tins, tea, sugar, a box of matches and two bars of chocolate into my backpack. I filled a glass with water I had taken from the well. Finally, I kissed my grandmother quickly on the side of the head and hurried out, leaving her to her work.

The sky had darkened while I was in the house. How could that have happened? It had only been a few minutes, surely? But now it looked as though it was going to rain, perhaps one of those violent downpours we often had during the months leading up to winter. My father was sitting where I had left him and seemed to be asleep. His hand was clutched across the wound in his chest. I wanted to carry the tin box over to him but my mother moved round and stood in my way. I held out the glass of water.

"I got this. For Father."

"That's good of you, Yasha. But he doesn't need it."

"But..."

"No, Yasha. Try to understand."

It took a few moments for the significance of what she was saying to sink in and at once a trapdoor opened and I plunged through it, into a world of pain.

My mother took the box and lifted the lid. Inside there was a roll of banknotes – a hundred rubles, more money than I had ever seen. My parents must have been saving it from their salaries, planning for the day when they returned to Moscow. But that wasn't going to happen, not now. She gave it all to me along with my internal passport, a document that everyone in Russia was required to own, even if you didn't travel. Finally she took out a small, black velvet bag and handed it to me too.

"That is everything, Yasha," she said. "You have to go."

"Mother..." I began. I felt huge tears swell up in my eyes and the

burning in my throat was worse than ever.

“You heard what your father said. Now, listen very carefully. You have to go to Moscow. I know it’s a long way away and you’ve never travelled on your own but you can make it. You can take the train. Not from Rosna. They’ll be checking everyone at the station. Go to Kirsk. You can reach it through the forest. That’s the safest way. Find the new highway and follow it. Do you understand?”

I nodded, miserably.

“You remember Kirsk. You’ve been there a few times. There’s a station with trains every day to Moscow ... one in the morning, one in the evening. Take the evening train, when it’s dark. If anyone asks you, say you’re visiting an uncle. Never tell anyone you came from Estrov. Never use that word again. Promise me that.”

“Where will I go in Moscow?” I asked. I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to stay with her.

She reached out and took me in her arms, hugging me against her. “Don’t be scared, Yasha. We have a good friend in Moscow. He’s a biology professor. He worked with your father and you’ll find him at the university. His name is Misha Dementyev. I’ll try to telephone him but I expect they’ll have cut the lines. It doesn’t matter. When you tell him who you are, he’ll look after you.”

Misha Dementyev. I clung onto the two words, my only lifeline.

My mother was still embracing me. I was looking at the curve of her neck, smelling her scent for the last time. “Why can’t you come with me?” I sobbed.

“It would do no good. I’m infected. I want to stay with your father. But it’s not so bad, knowing you’ve got away.” She moved me away from her, still holding me, looking straight into my eyes. “Now, you have to be brave. You have to leave. Don’t look back. Don’t let anyone stop you.”

“Mother...”

“I love you, my dear son. Now go!”

If I’d spoken to her again, I wouldn’t have been able to leave her. I knew that. We both did. I broke away. I ran.

The forest was on the other side of the house, to the north and

spreading to the east of Estrov. It stretched on for about thirty miles, mainly pine trees but also linden, birch and spruce. It was a dark, tangled place and none of us ever went into it, partly because we were afraid of getting lost but also because there were rumoured to be wolves around, particularly in the winter. But somewhere inside me I knew my mother was right. If there were police or soldiers in the area, they would concentrate on the main road. I would be safer out of sight. The highway that she'd mentioned cut through the forest and they were laying a new water pipe alongside it.

To begin with, I followed the track that wound through the gardens, trying to keep out of sight, although there was nobody around. In the distance, I saw a boy I knew, cycling past with a bundle under his arm, but he was alone. I passed the village shop. It was closed. I continued through the allotments where the villagers grew their own food and stole everyone else's. I was already hot, wearing a double set of clothes, and the air was suddenly warm and thick. The clouds were grey and swollen, rolling in from every side. It was definitely going to rain.

I still wasn't sure I was going to do what my mother had told me. Did she really think I could so easily run off and leave her on her own with my father lying dead beside the fence? No matter what had happened at the factory, and whatever she had said, I couldn't just abandon her. I would wait a few hours in the forest and see what happened. And then, once it was dark, I would return. She had talked about a weapon – anthrax. She had said the whole village was contaminated. But I refused to believe her. I was even angry with her for telling me these things. In truth, I do not think I was actually in my right mind.

And then I saw someone ahead of me, crouching down with their bottom in the air, pulling vegetables out of the ground. Even from this angle, I recognized him at once. It was Leo. He had been working on his family's vegetable patch, probably as a punishment for doing something wrong. He had two younger brothers and whenever any of them fought, their father would take a belt to them and they would end up either mending fences or gardening. He was covered in mud

with a bunch of very wrinkled carrots dangling from his hand, but seeing me approach, he broke into a grin.

“Hey, Yasha!” he called out. He did a double take, noticing my Pioneer clothes. “What are you doing?”

“Leo...” I was so glad to see him but I didn’t know what to say. How could I explain what had just happened?

“Did you hear the siren?” he said. “And there was shooting. I think something’s happened over at the factory.”

“Where are your parents?” I asked.

“Dad’s working. Mum’s at home.”

“Leo, you have to come with me.” The words came rushing out. I hadn’t planned to ask him along but suddenly it was the most important thing in the world. I couldn’t leave without him.

“Where are you going?” He lowered the carrots and stood there with his legs slightly apart, one hand on his hip, his boots reaching up to his thighs. For a moment he looked like one of those old posters, the sort they had printed to get the peasants to work in the fields. He gave me a crooked smile. “What’s the matter, Yasha? What’s wrong?”

“My dad’s dead,” I said.

“What?”

Hadn’t he understood anything? Hadn’t he realized that something was wrong? But that was Leo for you. Explosions, gun shots, alarms ... and he would just carry on weeding.

“He’s been shot,” I said. “That was what the siren was about. It was him. They tried to stop him leaving. But he told me I have to go away and hide. Something terrible has happened at the factory.” I was pleading with him. “Please, Leo. Come with me.”

“I can’t...”

He was going to argue. No matter what I told him, he would never have abandoned his family. But just then we became aware of a sound, something that neither of us had ever heard before. At the same time, we felt a slight pulsing in the air, beating against our skin. We looked round and saw five black dots in the sky, swooping low over the hills, heading towards the village. They were military helicopters, just like the ones in the pictures in my room. They were

still too far away to see properly but they were lined up in precise battle formation. It was that exactness that made them so menacing. Somehow I was certain that they weren't going to land. They weren't going to disgorge doctors and technicians who had come to help us. My parents had warned me that people were coming to Estrov to kill me and I had no doubt at all that they had arrived.

“Leo! Come on! Now!”

There must have been something in my voice, or perhaps it was the sight of the helicopters themselves, but this time Leo dropped his carrots and obeyed. Together, without a single thought, we began to run up the slope, away from the village. The edge of the forest, an endless line of thick trunks, branches, pine needles and shadows, stretched out before us. We were still about fifty metres away and now I found that my legs wouldn't work, that the soft mud was deliberately dragging me down. Behind me, the sound of the helicopters was getting louder. I didn't dare turn round but I could feel them getting closer and closer. And then – another shock – the bells of St Nicholas began to ring, the sound echoing over the rooftops. The church was empty. I had never heard the bells before.

I was sweating. My whole body felt as if it were trapped inside an oven. Something hit me on the shoulder and for a crazy moment I thought one of the helicopters had fired a bullet. But it was nothing more than a fat raindrop. The storm was about to break.

“Yasha!”

We stopped at the very edge of the forest and turned round just in time to see the helicopters deliver their first payload. They fired five missiles, one after the other. But they didn't hit anything ... not like in an old war film. The pilots hadn't actually been aiming at any particular buildings. The missiles exploded randomly – in lanes, in peoples' gardens – but the destruction was much, much worse than anything I could have imagined. Huge fireballs erupted at the point of impact, spreading out instantly so that they joined up with one another, wiping out everything they touched. The flames were a brilliant orange; fiercer and more intense than any fire I had ever seen. They devoured my entire world, burning up the houses, the

walls, the trees, the roads, the very soil. Nothing that touched those flames could possibly survive. The first five missiles wiped out almost the entire village but they were followed by five more and then another five. We could feel the heat reaching out to us, so intense that even though we were some distance from it, our eyes watered and we had to look away. I put up my hand to protect my face and felt the back of my fingers burn. In seconds, Estrov, the village where I had spent my entire life, was turned into hell. My father was already dead but I had no doubt at all that my mother had now joined him. And my grandmother. And Leo's mother and his brothers. It was impossible to see his house through the curtain of fire but by now it would be nothing more than ash.

The helicopters were continuing, heading towards us. Now that they were closer, I recognized them at once. They were Mil Mi-24s, sometimes known as Crocodiles, developed for the Russian military for both missile support and troop movements. Each one could carry eight men at speeds of over three hundred and fifty miles per hour. As well as the main and the tail rotors, the Mil had two wings stretching out of the main fuselage, each one equipped with a missile launcher that dangled beneath it. I had never seen anything that looked more deadly, more like a giant bird with claws outstretched, swooping out of the sky to snatch me up. They were getting closer and closer. I could actually see the nearest pilot, very low down in the glass bubble that was the cockpit window. Where had he come from? Had he once been a boy like me, dreaming of flying? How could he sit there and be responsible for so much killing? And yet he was without mercy. There could be no doubt at all that he was aiming the next salvo at me. I swear I saw him gazing straight at me as he fired. I saw the spurt of flame as the missiles were fired.

Fortunately, they fell short. A wall of flame erupted about thirty metres behind me. Even so, the heat was so intense that Leo screamed. I could smell the air burning. A cloud of chemicals and smoke poured over us. It was only later that I realized it must have briefly shielded us from the pilot. Otherwise he would have fired again.

Leo and I plunged into the forest. The light was cut out behind us. Instantly we were surrounded by green, with leaves and branches everywhere and soft moss beneath our feet. We had reached the top of the hill. The forest sloped down on the other side and this proved our salvation. We lost our footing and tumbled down, rolling over roots and mud. It was already raining harder. Water was dripping down and maybe that helped us too. We were invisible. We were away from the flames. As I fell, through the trees I caught a glimpse of the red and black horror that I had left behind. I heard the roar of helicopter blades. Branches were whipping and shaking all around me. Then I was at the very bottom of the hollow. Leo was next to me, staring helplessly, completely terrified. But we were protected by the forest and by the earth. The helicopters could not reach us.

Well, perhaps the pilots could have tried again. Maybe they had exhausted their missile supply. Maybe they didn't think it was worth wasting more of their ammunition on two small boys. But even as I lay there I knew that this wasn't over. They had seen us and they would radio ahead. Others would come to finish the work. It wasn't enough that the village had been destroyed. If anybody had managed to survive, they would have to be killed. There must be nobody left to tell what had happened.

"Yasha..." Leo gasped. He was crying. His face was a mess of mud and tears.

"We have to go," I said.

We struggled to our feet and dropped into the safety of the forest. Behind us, the sky was red, the helicopters hovering as Estrov continued to burn.

ЛЕС

THE FOREST

When I was a small boy, I had feared the forest with its ghosts and its demons. It had given me nightmares. My own parents had come from the city and didn't believe such things but Leo's mother used to tell me stories about it, the same stories that her mother had doubtless told her. Every child in the village knew them and stayed away. But now I wanted it to draw me in, to swallow me up and never let me go. The deeper I went, the safer I felt, surrounded by huge, solid trunks that blotted out the sky and everything silent except for the drip of the rain on the canopy of leaves. The real nightmare was behind me. It was almost impossible to think of my village and the people who had lived there. Mr Vladimov smoking his cigarettes until the stubs burnt his fingers. Mrs Bek who ran the village shop and put up with everyone's complaints when there was nothing on the shelves. The twins, Irina and Olga, so alike that we could never tell them apart but always arguing and at each other's throats. My grandmother. My parents. My friends. They had all gone as if they had never existed and nothing would remain of them, not even their names.

Never tell anyone you came from Estrov. Never use that word again.

My mother's warning to me. And of course she was right. The place of my birth had now become a sentence of death.

I was in shock. So much had happened and it had happened so quickly that my brain simply wasn't able to cope with it all. I had seen very few American films, and computer games hadn't arrived in my corner of Russia yet – so the sort of violence I had just experienced was completely alien to me. Perhaps it was for the best. If I had really considered my situation, I might easily have gone mad. I was fourteen years old and suddenly I had nothing except a hundred rubles, the clothes I was wearing and the name of a man I had never

met in a city I had never visited. My best friend was with me but it was as if his soul had flown out of him, leaving nothing but a shell behind. He was no longer crying but he was walking like a zombie. For the last hour, he had said nothing. We had been walking in silence with only the sound of our own footsteps and the rain hitting the leaves.

It wasn't over yet. We were both waiting for the next attack. Maybe the helicopters would return and bomb the forest. Maybe they would use poison gas next time. They knew we were here and they wouldn't let us get away.

"What was it all about, Yasha Gregorovich?" Leo asked. He used my full name in the formal way that we Russians do sometimes – when we want to make a point or when we are afraid. His face was puffy and I could see that his eyes were bright with tears, although he was trying hard not to cry in front of me.

"I don't know," I said. But that wasn't true. I knew only too well. "There was an accident at the factory," I went on. "Our parents lied to us. They weren't just making chemicals for farmers. They were also making weapons. Something went wrong and they had to close it down very quickly."

"The helicopters..."

"I suppose they didn't want to tell anyone what had happened. It's like that place we learnt about. You know... Chernobyl."

We all knew about Chernobyl in Ukraine. Not so long ago, when Russia was still part of the Soviet Union, there had been a huge explosion at a nuclear reactor. The whole area had been covered with clouds of radioactive dust – they had even reached parts of Europe. But at the time, the authorities had done everything they could to cover up what had happened. Even now it was uncertain how many people had actually died. That was the way the Russian government worked back then. If they had admitted there had been a catastrophe, it would have shown they were weak. So it was easy to imagine what they would do following an accident at a secret facility creating biological weapons. If a hundred or even five hundred people were murdered, what would it matter so long as things were kept quiet?

Leo was still trying to take it all in. It hurt me seeing him like this. This was a boy who had been afraid of nothing, who had been rude to all the teachers and who had never complained when he was beaten or sent on forced marches. But it was as if he had become five years younger. He was lost. “They killed everyone,” he said.

“They had to keep it a secret, Leo. My mother and father managed to get out of the factory. They told me to run away because they knew what was going to happen.” My voice cracked. “They’re both dead.”

“I’m sorry, Yasha.”

“Me too, Leo.”

He was my best friend. He was all that I had left in the world. But I still wasn’t telling him the whole truth. My arm was throbbing painfully and I was sure that he must have noticed the bloodstain on my sleeve but I hadn’t mentioned the syringe. My mother had inoculated me with the antidote against whatever had escaped into the air. She had said it would protect me. No one had done the same for Leo. Did that mean he was carrying the anthrax spores on him even now? Was he dying? I didn’t want to think about it and, coward that I was, I certainly couldn’t bring myself to talk to him about it.

We were still walking. The rain was getting heavier. Now it was making its way through the leaves and splashing down all around us. It was early in the afternoon but most of the light had gone. I had taken out my compass and given it to Leo. I could have used it myself of course but I thought it would be better for him to have his mind occupied – and anyway, he was better at finding directions than me. Not that the compass really helped. Every time we came to a particularly nasty knot of brambles or found a tangle of undergrowth blocking our path, we had to go another way. It was as if the forest itself was guiding us. Where? If it was feeling merciful, it would lead us to safety. But it might be just as likely to deliver us into our enemies’ hands.

The forest began to slope upwards, gently at first, then more steeply, and we found our feet kept slipping and we tripped over the roots. Leo looked dreadful, his clothes plastered across him, his face

deadly white, his hair soaking wet now, hanging lifelessly over his eyes. I felt guilty in my waterproof clothes but it was too late to hand them over. Ahead of us, the trees began to thin out. This was doubly bad news. First, it meant that we were even less protected from the rain. It would also be easier to spot us from the air if the helicopters returned.

“Over there!” I said.

I had seen an electricity pylon not too far away, poking out above the trees, part of the new construction. They had been laying all three together – the new highway, the water pipe and electricity – all part of the modernization of the area, before the work had ground to a halt. But even without tarmac or lighting, the road would lead us straight to Kirsk. At least we knew which way to go.

I had very little memory of Kirsk. The last time I had been there had been about a year ago, on a school trip. Getting out of Estrov had been exciting enough but when we had got there we had spent half the time in a museum, and by the afternoon I was bored stiff. When I was twelve, I had spent a week in Kirsk Hospital after I’d broken my leg. I had been taken there by bus and had no idea how to get around. But surely the station wouldn’t be too difficult to find and at least I would have enough money to buy two tickets for the train. A hundred rubles was worth a great deal. It was more than a month’s salary for one of my teachers.

We trudged forward, making better progress. We were beginning to think that we had got away after all, that nobody was interested in us any more. Of course it is just when you begin to think like that, when you relax your guard, that the worst happens. If I had been in the same situation now, I would have gone anywhere except towards the new highway. When you are in danger, you must always opt for what is least expected. Predictability kills.

We reached the first evidence of the construction; abandoned spools of wire, cement slabs, great piles of plastic tubing. Ahead of us, a brown ribbon of dug-up earth stretched out into the gloom. The town of Kirsk and the railway to Moscow lay at the other end.

“How far is it?” Leo asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “About twenty miles, I think. Are you OK?”
Leo nodded but the misery in his face told another story.

“We can do it,” I said. “Five or six hours. And it can’t rain for ever.”

It felt as if it was going to do just that. We could actually see the raindrops now, fat and relentless, slanting down in front of us and splattering on the ground. It was like a curtain hanging between the trees and we could barely make out the road on the other side. There were more pipes scattered on both sides and after a short while we came to a deep ditch which must have been cut as part of the water project. Was it really possible for an entire community to near the end of the twentieth century without running water? I had carried enough buckets down to the well to know the answer to that.

We walked for another ten minutes, neither of us speaking, our feet splashing in the puddles, and then we saw them. They were ahead of us, a long line of soldiers, spread out across the forest, making steady progress towards us ... like detectives looking for clues after a murder. They were spaced so that nobody would be able to pass through the line without being seen. They had no faces. They were dressed in pale silver anti-chemical and biological uniforms with hoods and gas masks, and they carried semi-automatic machine guns. They had dogs with them, scrawny Alsatians, straining at the end of metal leashes. It was as if they had walked out of my worst nightmare. They didn’t look human at all.

It should have been obvious from the start that whoever had sent the helicopters would follow them up with an infantry backup. First, destroy the village, then put a noose around the place to make sure there are no survivors who can spread the virus. The line of militia men, if that’s what they were, would have formed a huge circle around Estrov. They would close in from all sides. And they would have been told to shoot any stragglers – Leo and me – on sight. Nobody could be allowed to tell what had happened. And, above all, the anthrax virus that we might be carrying must not break free.

They would have seen us at once but for the rain. And the dogs too would have smelt us if everything hadn’t been so wet. In the darkness of the forest, the pale colour of their protective gear stood out, but for

a few precious seconds we were invisible. I reached out and grabbed Leo's arm. We turned and ran the way we had come.

It was the worst thing to do. Since that time, long ago now, I have been taught survival techniques for exactly such situations. You do not break your pace. You do not panic. It is the very rhythm of your movement that will alert your enemy. We should have melted to one side, found cover and then retreated as quickly but as steadily as we could. Instead, the sound of our shoes stamping on the wet ground signalled that we were there. One of the dogs began to bark ferociously, followed immediately by the rest of them. Somebody shouted. An instant later there was the deafening clamour of machine-gun fire, weapons spraying bullets that sliced through the trees and the leaves, sending pieces of debris showering over our heads. We had been seen. The line began to move forward more urgently. We were perhaps thirty or forty metres ahead of them but we were already close to exhaustion, drenched, unarmed. We were children. We had no chance at all.

More machine-gun fire. I saw mud splattering up inches from my feet. Leo was slightly ahead of me. His legs were shorter than mine and he had been more tired than me but I was determined to keep him in front of me, not to leave him behind. If one went down, we both went down. The dogs were making a hideous sound. They had seen their prey. They wanted to be released.

And we stayed on the half-built highway! That was a killing ground if ever there was one, wide and exposed ... an easy matter for a sniper to pick us off. I suppose we thought we could run faster with a flat surface beneath our feet. But every step I took, I was waiting for the bullet that would come smashing between my shoulders. I could hear the dogs, the guns, the blast of the whistles. I didn't look back but I could actually feel the men closing in behind me.

Still, we had the advantage of distance. The line of soldiers would move more slowly than us. They wouldn't want to break rank and risk the chance of our doubling back and slipping through. I had perhaps one minute to work out some sort of scheme before they caught up with us. Climb a tree? No, it would take too long, and

anyway, the dogs would sniff us out. Continue back down the hill? Pointless. There were probably more soldiers coming up the other side. I was still running, my heart pounding in my chest, the breath harsh in my throat. And then I saw it ... the ditch we had passed with the plastic tubes scattered about.

“This way, Leo!” I shouted.

At the same time, I threw myself off the road, skidding down the deep bank and landing in a stream of water that rose over my ankles.

“Yasha, what are you...?” Leo began but he was sensible enough not to hesitate, turning back and following me down, almost landing on top of me. And so there we were, below the level of the road, and I was already making my way back, heading *towards* the line of soldiers, looking for what I prayed must be there.

Hundreds of metres of the water pipe had already been laid. The opening was in front of us: a perfect black circle, like the entrance to some futuristic cave. It was small. If I hadn't been so thin and Leo hadn't been so slight, neither of us would have fitted into it and it was unlikely that many of the soldiers would have been able to follow – certainly not in their gas masks and protective gear. They would have been mad to try. Would they really have been prepared to bury themselves alive, plunging into utter darkness with tons of damp earth above their heads?

That was what we did. On our hands and knees, we threw ourselves forward, our shoulders scraping against the curve of the pipe. At least it was dry inside the tunnel. But it was also pitch-black. When I looked back to see if Leo was behind me, I caught a glimmer of soft light a few metres away. But when I looked ahead ... there was nothing! I brought my hand up and touched my nose but I couldn't see my fingers. For a moment, I found it difficult to breathe. I had to fight off the claustrophobia, the sense of being suffocated, of being squeezed to death. I wondered if it would be a good idea to go any further. We could have stayed where we were and used the tunnel as a hiding place until everyone had gone – but that wasn't good enough for me. I could imagine a burst of machine-gun fire killing me or, worse still, paralysing me and leaving me to die slowly in the

darkness. I could feel the Alsatians, sent after us, snapping and snarling their way down the tunnel and then tearing ferociously at our legs and thighs. I had to let the tunnel carry me away and it didn't matter where it took me. So I kept going with Leo behind me, the two of us burrowing ever further beneath the wood.

To the soldiers it must have seemed as if we had disappeared by magic. They would have passed the ditch but it's quite likely that they didn't see the pipeline – or, if they did, refused to believe that we could actually fit into it. Once again, the rain covered our tracks. The dogs failed to pick up our scent. Any footprints were washed away. And the soldiers were completely unaware that, as they moved forward, we were right underneath them, crawling like insects through the mud. When I looked back again, the entrance was no longer there. It was as if a shutter had come down, sealing us in. I could hear Leo very close to me, his breath sobbing. But any sound in the tunnel was strange and muted. I felt the weight above me, pressing down.

We had swapped one hell for another.

We could only go forward. There wasn't enough room to turn round. I suppose we could have shuffled backwards until we reached the tunnel entrance, but what was the point of that? The soldiers would be looking for us and once we emerged the dogs would be onto us instantly. On the other hand, the further we went forward, the worse our situation became. Suppose the tunnel simply ended? Suppose we ran out of air? Every inch that we continued was another inch into the grave and it took all my willpower to force myself on. I think Leo only followed because he didn't want to be left on his own. I was getting warmer. Once more, I was sweating inside my clothes. I could feel the sweat mixed with rainwater under my armpits and in the palms of my hands. My knees were already hurting. Occasionally, I passed rivets, where one section of the pipe had been fastened into the next, and I felt them tugging at my anorak, scratching across my back. And I was blind. It really was as if someone had switched off my eyes. The blackness was very physical. It was like a surgical operation.

“Yasha...?” Leo’s whispered voice came out of nowhere.

“It’s all right, Leo,” I said. My own voice didn’t sound like me at all. “Not much further.”

But we continued for what felt like an eternity. We were moving like robots with no sense of direction, no choice of where to go. We were simply functioning – one hand forward, then the next, knees following behind, utterly alone. There was nothing to hear apart from ourselves. Suppose the tunnel went all the way to Kirsk? Would we have the strength to travel as far as twenty miles underground? Of course not. Between us, we had half a litre of water. We hadn’t eaten for hours. I had to stop myself imagining what might happen. If I wasn’t careful, I would scare myself to death.

Hand and knee, hand and knee. Every part of me was hurting. I wanted to stand up, and the fact that I couldn’t almost made me cry out with frustration. My shoulders hit the curve of the pipe again and again. My eyes were closed. What was the point of using them when I couldn’t see? And then, quite suddenly, I was outside. I felt the breeze brush over my shoulders and the rain, lighter now, patter onto my head and the back of my neck. I opened my eyes. The workmen had constructed some sort of inspection hatch and they had left this part of the pipe open. I was crouching in a V-shaped ditch with pieces of wire and rusting metal bolts all around. I pulled back my sleeve and looked at my watch. Amazingly, it was five o’clock. I thought only an hour had passed but the whole day had gone.

Leo clambered out into the half-light and sat there, blinking. For a moment, neither of us dared speak but there were no sounds around us and it seemed fairly certain we were on our own.

“We’re OK,” I said. “We went under them. They don’t know we’re here.”

“What next?” Leo asked.

“We can keep going ... follow the road to Kirsk.”

“They’ll be looking for us there.”

“I know. We can worry about that when we get there.”

And just for one moment, I thought we were going to make it. We had escaped from the helicopters. We had outwitted the soldiers. I

had a hundred rubles in my pocket. I would get us to Moscow and we would tell the whole world what had happened and we would be heroes. Right then, I really did think that, despite what we had been through and all that we had lost, we might actually be all right.

But then Leo spoke.

“Yasha,” he said. “I don’t feel well.”

НОЧЬ

NIGHT

We couldn't stay where we were. I was afraid that the soldiers would see the entrance to the pipeline and realize how we had managed to slip past them – in which case they would double back and find us. We had to put more distance between us and them while we still had the strength. But at the same time I saw that Leo couldn't go much further. He had a headache and he was finding it difficult to breathe. Was it too much to hope that he had simply caught a cold, that he was in shock? It didn't have to be contamination by the chemicals from the factory. I tried to convince myself that, like me, he was exhausted and if he could just get a night's rest he would be well again.

Even so, I knew I had to find him somewhere warm to shelter. He needed food. Somehow I had to dry his clothes. As I looked around me, at the spindly trees that rose up into an ever darkening sky, I felt a sense of complete helplessness. How could I possibly manage on my own? I wanted my parents and I had to remind myself that they weren't going to come, that I was never going to see them again. I was sick with grief – but something inside me told me that I couldn't give in. Leo and I hadn't escaped from Estrov simply to die out here, a few miles away, in the middle of a forest.

We walked together for another hour, still following the road. They'd been able to afford asphalt for this section, which at least made it easier to find our way in the dark. I knew it was dangerous, that we had more chance of being spotted, but I didn't dare lose myself among the trees.

And in the end it was the right decision. We stumbled upon it quite by chance, a wooden hut which must have been built for the construction team and abandoned only recently. The door was padlocked but I managed to kick it in, and once we were inside I was

surprised to find two bunks, a table, cupboards and even an iron stove. I checked the cupboards. There was no food or medicine but the almost empty shelves did offer me a few rewards. Using my torch, I found some old newspapers, saucepans, tin mugs and a fork. I was glad now that I had thought to take a box of matches from my kitchen and that my waterproof clothes had managed to keep them dry. There was no coal or firewood so I tore off some of the cupboard doors and smashed them up with my foot, and ten minutes later I had a good fire blazing. I wasn't worried about the smoke being seen. It was too dark and I kept the door and the shutters closed to stop the light escaping.

I helped Leo out of his wet clothes and laid them on the floor to dry. He stretched himself out on the nearest bunk and I covered him with newspaper and a rug from the floor. It might not have been too clean but at least it would help to keep him warm. I had the food that I had brought from my home and I took it out. Leo and I had drunk all our water but that wasn't a problem. I carried a saucepan outside and filled it from the gutter that ran round the side of the building. After the rain, it was full to overflowing and boiling the water in the flames would get rid of any germs. I added the tea and the sugar, and balanced the pan on the stove. I broke the chocolate bars into pieces and examined the tins. There were three of them and they all contained herring but, fool that I was, I had forgotten to bring a tin opener.

While Leo drifted in and out of sleep, I spent the next half-hour desperately trying to open the tins. In a way, it did me good to have to focus on a problem that was so small and so stupid. Forget the fact that you are alone, in hiding, that there are soldiers who want to kill you, that your best friend is ill, that everything has been taken from you. Open the tin! In the end, I managed it with the fork that I had found, hammering at it with a heavy stone and piercing the lid so many times that eventually I was able to peel it away. The herring was grey and oily. I'm not sure that anyone eats it any more, but it had always been a special treat when I was growing up. My mother would serve it with slabs of dry black bread or sometimes potatoes.

When I smelt the fish, I thought of her and I felt all the pain welling up once more, even though I was doing everything I could to block out what had happened.

I tried to feed some to Leo but, after all my efforts, he was too tired to eat and it was all I could manage to force him to sip some tea. I was suddenly very hungry myself and gobbled down one of the tins, leaving the other two for him. I was still hopeful that he would be feeling better in the morning. It seemed to me that now that he was resting, he was breathing a little easier. Maybe all the rain would have washed away the anthrax spores. His clothes were still drying in front of the fire. Sitting there, watching his chest rise and fall beneath the covers, I tried to persuade myself that everything would be all right.

It was the beginning of the longest night of my life. I took off my outer clothes and lay down on the second bunk but I couldn't sleep. I was frightened that the fire would go out. I was frightened that the soldiers would find the hut and burst in. Actually, I was so filled with fears of one sort or another that I didn't need to define them. For hours I listened to the crackle of the flames and the rasp of Leo's breath in his throat. From time to time, I drifted into a state where I was floating, although still fully conscious. Several times, I got up and fed more of the furniture into the stove, doing my best to break the wood without making too much noise. Once, I went outside to urinate. It was no longer raining but a few drops of water were still falling from the trees. I could hear them but I couldn't see them. The sky was totally black. As I stood there, I heard the howl of a wolf. I had been holding the torch but at that moment I almost dropped it into the undergrowth. So the wolves weren't just a bit of village gossip! This one could have been far away, but it seemed to be right next to me, the sound starting impossibly low then rising higher and higher as if the creature had somehow flown into the air. I buttoned myself up and ran back inside, determined that nothing would get me out again until it was light.

My own clothes were still damp. I took them off and knelt in front of the fire. If anything got me through that night it was that stove. It

kept me warm and without its glow I wouldn't have been able to see, which would have made all my imaginings even worse. I took out the roll of ten-ruble notes that had been in the tin and at the same time I found the little black bag my mother had given me. I opened it. Inside, there was a pair of earrings, a necklace and a ring. I had never seen them before and wondered where she had got them from. Were they valuable? I made an oath to myself that whatever happened, I would never sell them. They were the only remains of my past life. They were all I had left. I wrapped them up again and climbed onto the other bunk. Almost naked and lying uncomfortably on the hard mattress, I dozed off again. When I next opened my eyes, the fire was almost out and when I pulled back the shutters, the very first streaks of pink were visible outside.

The sun seemed to take for ever to rise. They call them the small hours, that time from four o'clock onwards, and I know from experience that they are always the most miserable of the day. That is when you feel most vulnerable and alone. Leo was sound asleep. The hut was even more desolate than before – I had fed almost anything that was made of wood into the fire. The world outside was wet, cold and threatening. As I got dressed again, I remembered that in a few hours I should have been going to school.

Wake up, Yasha. Come on! Get your things together...

I had to force my mother's voice out of my head. She wasn't there for me any more. Nobody was. From now on, if I was to survive, I had to look after myself.

The two remaining tins of fish were still waiting, uneaten, on a shelf beside the fire. I was tempted to wolf them down myself, as I was really hungry, but I was keeping them for Leo. I made some more tea and ate a little chocolate, then I went back outside. The sky was now a dirty off-white, and the trees were more skeletal than ever. But at least there was nobody around. The soldiers hadn't come back. Walking around, I came across a shrub of bright red lingonberries. They were past their best but I knew they would be edible. We used to make them into a dish called *kissel*, a sort of jelly, and I stuffed some of them into my mouth. They were slightly sour but I thought

they would keep me going and I placed several more in my pockets.

“Yasha...?”

As I returned to the hut, I heard Leo call my name. He had woken up. I was delighted to hear his voice and hurried over to him. “How are you feeling, Leo?” I asked.

“Where are we?”

“We found a shed. After the tunnel. Don’t you remember?”

“I’m very cold, Yasha.”

He looked terrible. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t pretend otherwise. There was no colour at all in his face, and his eyes were burning, out of focus. I didn’t know why he was cold. The one thing I had managed to do was to keep the hut reasonably warm and I had put plenty of makeshift covers on the bed.

“Maybe you should eat something,” I said.

I brought the open tin of herring over but he recoiled at the smell. “I don’t want it,” he said. His voice rattled in his chest. He sounded like an old man.

“All right. But you must have some tea.”

I took the mug over and forced him to sip from it. As he strained his neck towards me, I noticed a red mark under his chin and, very slowly, trying not to let him know what I was doing, I folded back the covers to see what was going on. I was shocked by what I saw. The whole of Leo’s neck and chest was covered in dreadful, diamond-shaped sores. His skin looked as if it had been burned in a fire. I could easily imagine that his whole body was like this and I didn’t want to see any more. His face was the only part of him that had been spared. Underneath the covers he was a rotting corpse.

I knew that if it hadn’t been for my parents, I would be exactly the same as Leo. They had injected me with something that protected me from the biochemical weapon that they had helped to build. They had said it acted quickly and here was the living – or perhaps the dying – proof. No wonder the authorities had been so quick to quarantine the area. If the anthrax had managed to do this to Leo in just a few hours, imagine what it would do to the rest of Russia as it spread.

“I’m sorry, Yasha,” Leo whispered.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I said. I was casting about me, trying to find something to do. The fire, untended, had almost gone out. But there was no more wood to put in it anyway.

“I can’t come with you,” Leo said.

“Yes, you can. We’re just going to have to wait. That’s all. You’ll feel better when the sun comes up.”

He shook his head. He knew I was lying for his sake. “I don’t mind. I’m glad you looked after me. I always liked being with you, Yasha.”

He rested his head back. Despite the marks on his body, he didn’t seem to be in pain. I sat beside him, and after a few minutes he began to mutter something. I leant closer. He wasn’t saying anything. He was singing. I recognized the words. “*Close the door after me ... I’m going.*” Everyone at school would have known the song. It was by a rock singer called Viktor Tsoi and it had been the rage throughout the summer.

Perhaps Leo didn’t even want to live – not without his family, not without the village. He got to the end of the line and he died. And the truth is that, apart from the silence, there wasn’t a great deal of difference between Leo alive and Leo dead. He simply stopped. I closed his eyes. I drew the covers over his face. And then I began to cry. Is it shocking that I felt Leo’s death even more than that of my own parents? Maybe it was because they had been snatched from me so suddenly. I hadn’t even been given a chance to react. But it had taken Leo the whole of that long night to die and I was sitting with him even now, remembering everything he had been to me. I had been close to my parents but much closer to Leo. And he was so young ... the same age as me.

In a way, I think I am writing this for Leo.

I have decided to keep a record of my life because I suspect my life will be short. I do not particularly want to be remembered. Being unknown has been essential to my work. But I sometimes think of him and I would like him to understand what it was that made me what I am. After all, living as a boy of fourteen in a Russian village, it had never been my intention to become a contract killer.

Leo’s death may have been one step on my journey. It was not a

major step. It did not change me. That happened much later.

I set fire to the hut with Leo still inside it. I remembered the helicopters and knew that the flames might attract their attention, but it was the only way I could think of to prevent the disease spreading. And if the soldiers were drawn here, perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing. They had their gas masks and protective suits. They would know how to decontaminate the area.

But that didn't mean I was going to hang around waiting for them to come. With the smoke billowing behind me, carrying Leo out of this world, I hurried away, along the road to Kirsk.

КИРСК

KIRSK

I entered Kirsk on legs that were tired and feet that were sore and remembered that the last time I had been there, it had been on a school trip to the museum.

Lenin had once visited Kirsk. The great Soviet leader had stopped briefly in the town on his way to somewhere more important because there was a problem with his train. He made a short speech on the station platform, then went to the local café for a cup of tea and, happening to glance in the mirror, decided that his beard and moustache needed a trim. Not surprisingly, the local barber almost had a heart attack when the most powerful man in the Soviet Union walked into his shop. The cup that he drank from and the clippings of black hair were still on display in the History and Folklore Museum of Kirsk.

It was a large, reddish-brown building with rooms that were filled with objects and after only an hour my head had already been pounding. From the outside, it looked like a railway station. Curiously, Kirsk railway station looked quite like a museum, with wide stairs, pillars and huge bronze doors that should have opened onto something more important than ticket offices, platforms and waiting rooms. I had seen it on that last trip but I couldn't remember where it was. When you've been taken to a place in a coach and marched around shoulder to shoulder in a long line with no talking allowed, you don't really look where you're going. That hadn't been my only visit. My father had taken me to the cinema here once. And then there had been my visit to the hospital. But all these places could have been on different planets. I had no idea where they were in relation to one another.

After Estrov, the place felt enormous. I had forgotten how many buildings there were, how many shops, how many cars and buses

racing up and down the wide, cobbled streets. Everywhere seemed to have electricity. There were wires zigzagging from pole to pole, crossing each other like a disastrous cat's cradle. But I'm not suggesting that Kirsk was anything special. I'd spent my whole life in a tiny village so I was easily impressed. I didn't notice the crumbling plaster on the buildings, the empty construction sites, the pits in the road and the dirty water running through the gutters.

It was late afternoon when I arrived and the light was already fading. My mother had said there were two trains a day to Moscow and I hoped I was in time to catch the evening one. I had never spent a night in a hotel before and even though I had money in my pocket, the idea of finding one and booking a room filled me with fear. How much would I have to pay? Would they even give a room to a boy on his own? I had been walking non-stop, leaving the forest behind me just after midday. I was starving hungry. Since I had left the shed, all I'd had to eat were the lingonberries I'd collected. I still had a handful of them in my pocket but I couldn't eat any more because they were giving me stomach cramps. My feet were aching and soaking wet. I was wearing my leather boots, which had suddenly decided to leak. I felt filthy and wondered if they would let me onto the train. And what if they didn't? I had only one plan – to get to Moscow – and even that seemed daunting. I had seen pictures of the city at school, of course, but I had no real idea what it would be like.

Finding the station wasn't so difficult in the end. Somehow I stumbled across the centre of the town ... I suppose every road led there if you walked enough. It was a spacious area with an empty fountain and a Second World War monument, a slab of granite shaped like a slice of cake with the inscription: WE SALUTE THE GLORIOUS DEAD OF KIRSK. I had always been brought up to respect all those who had lost their lives in the war, but I know now that there is nothing glorious about being dead. The monument was surrounded by statues of generals and soldiers, many of them on horseback. Was that how they had set off to face the German tanks?

The station was right in front of me, at the end of a wide, very straight boulevard with trees on both sides. I recognized it at once. It

was surrounded by stalls selling everything from suitcases, blankets and cushions to all sorts of food and drink. I could smell *shashlyk* – skewers of meat – cooking on charcoal fires and it made my mouth water. I was desperate to buy something but that was when I realized I had a problem. Although I had a lot of money in my pocket, it was all in large notes. I had no coins. If I were to hand over a ten-ruble note for a snack that would cost no more than a few kopecks, I would only draw attention to myself. The stallholder would assume I was a thief. Better to wait until I'd bought my train ticket. At least then I would have change.

With these thoughts in my mind, I walked towards the main entrance of the station. I was so relieved to have got here and so anxious to be on my way that I was careless. I was keeping my head down, trying not to catch anyone's eye. I should have been looking all around me. In fact, if I had been sensible, I would have tried to enter the station from a completely different direction ... around the side or the back. As it was, I hadn't taken more than five or six steps before I found that my way was blocked. I glanced up and saw two policemen standing in front of me, dressed in long grey coats with insignia around their collars and military caps. They were both young, in their twenties. They had revolvers hanging from their belts.

"Where are you going?" one of them asked. He had bad skin, very raw, as if he had only started shaving recently and had used a blunt razor.

"To the station." I pointed, trying to sound casual.

"Why?"

"I work there. After school. I help clean the platforms." I was making things up as I went along.

"Where have you come from?"

"Over there..." I pointed to one of the apartment blocks I had passed on my way into the town.

"Your name?"

"Leo Tretyakov." My poor dead friend. Why had I chosen him?

The two policemen hesitated and for a moment I thought they were going to let me pass. Surely there was no reason to stop me. I was just

a boy, doing odd jobs after school. But then the second policeman spoke. "Your identity papers," he demanded. His eyes were cold.

I had used a false name because I was afraid the authorities would know who I was. After all, it had been my parents, Anton and Eva Gregorovich, who had escaped from the factory. But now I was trapped. The moment they looked at my passport, they would know I had lied to them. I should have been watching out for them from the start. Now that I looked around me, I realized that the station was crawling with policemen. Obviously. The police would know what had happened at Estrov. They would have been told that two boys had escaped. They had been warned to keep an eye out for us at every station in the area ... and I had simply walked into their arms.

"I don't have them," I stammered. I put a stupid look on my face, as if I didn't realize how serious it was to be out without ID. "They're at home."

It might have worked. I was only fourteen and looked young for my age. But maybe the policemen had been given my description. Maybe one of the helicopter pilots had managed to take my photograph as he flew overhead. Either way, they knew. I could see it in their eyes, the way they glanced at each other. They were only at the start of their careers, and this was a huge moment for them. It could lead to promotion, a pay rise, their names in the newspaper. They had just scored big time. They had me.

"You will come with us," the first policeman said.

"But I've done nothing wrong. My mother will be worried." Why was I even bothering? Neither of them believed me.

"No arguments," the second man snapped.

I had no choice. If I argued, if I tried to run, they would grab me and call for backup. I would be bundled into a police van before I could blink. It was better, for the moment, to stick with them. If they were determined to bring me into the police station themselves, there might still be an opportunity for me to get away. The building could be on the other side of town. By going with them, I would at least buy myself a little time to plan a way out of this.

We walked slowly and all the time I was thinking, my eyes darting

about, adding up the possibilities. There were plenty of people around. The working day was coming to an end and they were on their way home. But they wouldn't help me. They wouldn't want to get involved. I glanced back at the two policemen who were walking about two steps behind me. What was it that I had noticed about them? They had clearly been pleased they had caught me, no question of that – but at the same time they were nervous. Well, that was understandable. This was a big deal for them.

But there was something else. They were nervous for another reason. I saw it now. They were walking very carefully, close enough to grab me if I tried to escape but not so close that they could actually touch me. Why the distance between me and them? Why hadn't they put handcuffs on me? Why were they giving me even the smallest chance to run away? It made no sense.

Unless they knew.

That was it. It had to be.

I had supposedly been infected with a virus so deadly that it had forced the authorities to wipe out my village. It had killed Leo in less than twenty-four hours. The soldiers in the forest had all been dressed in biochemical protective gear. The police in Kirsk – and in Rosna, for that matter – must have been told that I was dangerous, infected. None of them could have guessed that my parents had risked everything to inoculate me. They probably didn't know that an antidote existed at all. There was nothing to protect the young officers who had arrested me. As far as they were concerned, I was a walking time bomb. They wanted to bring me in. But they weren't going to come too close.

We continued walking, away from the station. A few people passed us but said nothing and looked the other way. The policemen were still hanging back and now I knew why. Although it didn't look like it, I had the upper hand. They were afraid of me! And I could use that.

Casually, I slipped my hand into my pocket. Because the two men were behind me, they didn't see the movement. I took it out and wiped my mouth. I sensed that we were drawing close to the police

station from the police cars parked ahead.

“Down there...!” one of the policemen snapped. We were going to enter the police station the back way, down a wide alleyway and across a deserted car park with overflowing dustbins lined up along a rusting fence. We turned off and suddenly we were on our own. It was exactly what I wanted.

I stumbled slightly and let out a groan, clutching hold of my stomach. Neither of the policemen spoke. I stopped. One of them prodded me in the back. Just one finger. No contact with my skin.

“Keep moving,” he commanded.

“I can’t,” I said, putting as much pain as I could manage into my voice.

I twisted round. At the same time, I began to cough, making horrible retching noises as if my lungs were tearing themselves apart. I sucked in, gasping for air, still holding my stomach. The policemen stared at me in horror. There was bright blood all around my lips, trickling down my chin. I coughed again and drops of blood splattered in their direction. I watched them fall back as if they had come face to face with a poisonous snake. And as far as they knew, my blood *was* poison. If any of it touched them, they would end up like me.

But it wasn’t blood.

Just a minute ago, I had slipped some of the lingonberries from the forest into my mouth and chewed them up. What I was spitting was red berry juice mixed with my own saliva.

“Please help me,” I said. “I’m not well.”

The two policemen had come to a dead halt, caught between two conflicting desires: one to hold onto me, the other to be as far away from me as possible. I was overacting like crazy, grimacing and staggering about like a drunk, but it didn’t matter. Just as I’d suspected, they’d been told how dangerous I was. They knew the stakes. Their imagination was doing half the work for me.

“Everyone died,” I went on. “They all died. Please ... I don’t want to be like them.” I reached out imploringly. My hand was stained red. The two men stepped back. They weren’t coming anywhere near. “So

much pain!” I sobbed. I fell to my knees. The juice dripped onto my jacket.

The policemen made their decision. If they stayed where they were, if they tried to force me to my feet, it would kill them ... quickly and unpleasantly. Yes, they wanted their promotion. But their lives mattered more. Maybe it occurred to them that the very fact that they had come close to me meant they themselves would have to be eliminated. As far as they could see, I was dying anyway. I was lying on my side now, writhing on the ground, sobbing. My whole face was covered in blood. One of them spoke briefly to the other. I didn't hear what he said but his colleague must have agreed because a moment later they had gone, hurrying back the way they had come. I watched them turn a corner. I very much doubted that they would report what had just happened. After all, dereliction of duty would not be something they would wish to advertise. They would probably spend the rest of the day at the bathhouse, hoping that the steam and hot water would wash away the disease.

I waited until I was sure they had gone, then got to my feet and wiped my face with my sleeve. At least the encounter had given me an advance warning. There was no way I was going to walk into the railway station at Kirsk. The moment I tried to buy a train ticket, there would be someone there to arrest me and I very much doubted the same trick would work a second time. If I was going to get onto a train to Moscow, I was going to have to think of something else.

And I already had an idea.

There had been quite a few passengers arriving in taxis and coming off buses just before I had been arrested and that suggested that the evening train might be coming soon. At the same time, I'd seen a number of porters running forward to help them with their luggage. Some of them had been boys, dressed in loose-fitting grey jackets with red piping down the sleeves. I don't think they were employed officially. They were just trying to make a few kopecks on the side.

I made my way back towards the station – only this time I stayed behind the trees, close to the buildings, keeping an eye out for any policemen, mingling with the crowd. I soon found what I was looking

for. One of the porters was sitting outside a café, smoking a cigarette. He was about my age, even if he was trying to disguise it with a beard and a moustache. They were both made of that horrible wispy hair that doesn't really belong on a face. His jacket was hanging open. His cap sat crookedly on his head.

I sidled up next to him and sat down. After a while, he noticed me and nodded in my direction without smiling. It was enough.

“When's the next train to Moscow?” I asked.

He glanced at his watch. “Twenty minutes.”

I pretended to consider this piece of information. “How would you like to make five rubles?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed. Five rubles was probably as much as he earned in a week.

“I'll be honest with you, friend,” I said. “I'm in trouble with the police. I was almost arrested just now. I need to get on that train and if you'll sell me your jacket and your cap, I'll give you the cash.”

It was not such a big gamble. Somehow, I knew that this boy would be greedy. And anyway, most people in Russia would help you if you were trying to get away from the authorities. That was how we were.

“Why do the police want you?” he asked.

“I'm a thief.”

He sucked lazily on his cigarette. “I will give you my jacket and cap,” he said. “But it will cost you ten rubles.”

“Agreed.”

I took out the money, taking care not to show him how much I had, and handed over a single note. Tonight, this porter would drink himself into a stupor. He might invite his friends to join him. He handed me his coat and his cap – but I did not go straight to the station. I stopped at one of the stalls and used another four rubles to buy a pair of second-hand suitcases from an old man who had a whole pile of them. Quickly, I took off my outer clothes and slipped them into one of the cases. I put on the jacket and cap. Then, carrying the suitcases, I made my way to the station.

It seemed now that the police were everywhere. Was it possible that the ones who had arrested me had talked after all? They had thrown

a ring around the entire building. They were in front of the ticket office, on the platform. But not one of them noticed me. I waited until a smart-looking couple – some sort of local government official and his wife – got out of a taxi and I followed them into the station. They did not look round. But to the police and to anyone else who glanced our way, it simply looked as if they had hired a porter and that the two almost empty cases I was carrying were theirs.

I had timed it perfectly. We had no sooner arrived at the platform than a train drew in. The evening train to Moscow. I followed my clients to their carriage and climbed in behind them. They were completely unaware of my presence and although I was out there, in plain sight, nobody challenged me.

This is something that has not changed to this day. People look at the clothes you are wearing without ever thinking about the person who is inside. A man with a back-to-front collar is a vicar. A woman in a white coat with a stethoscope around her neck is a doctor. It is as simple as that. You do not ask them for ID.

I stayed on the train and a few minutes later it left, very quickly picking up speed, carrying me into the darkness. I knew I would never return.

MOCKBA

MOSCOW

Kazansky Station. Moscow.

It is hard to remember my feelings as the train drew near to its final destination. On the one hand, I was elated. I had made it. I had travelled six hundred miles, leaving the police and all my other problems behind me. But what of this new world in which I was about to find myself? The train would stop. The doors would open. And what then?

Through the windows I had already seen apartment blocks, one after another, that must have been home to tens of thousands of people. How could they live like that, so many of them, piled up on top of each other? Then there were the churches and their golden domes, ten times the size of poor St Nicholas. The factories billowing smoke into a sky that was cloudless, sunless, a single sheet of grey. But all of these were dwarfed by the skyscrapers with their spires and glittering needles, thousands of windows, millions of bricks, rising up as if from some crazy dream. Of course I had been shown pictures of them at school. I knew they had been built by Stalin back in the 1940s and 1950s. But seeing them for myself was different. Somehow I was shocked that they did actually exist and that they really were here, scattered around the city, watching over it.

I had been fortunate on the train. There was an empty compartment right at the back with a bunk bed that folded down. That was where I slept – not on the bunk but underneath it on the floor, out of sight of the ticket collectors. The strange thing was that I managed to sleep at all, but then I suppose I was exhausted. I woke up once or twice in the night and listened to the train rumbling through the darkness and I could almost feel the memories slipping away ... Estrov, Leo, my parents, my school. I knew that by the time I arrived in Moscow, I would be little more than an empty shell, a fourteen-year-old boy

with no past and perhaps no future. There was even a small part of me that wished I hadn't escaped from the police. At least, that way, I wouldn't have to make any decisions. I wouldn't be on my own.

One name stayed with me, turning over and over in my head. Misha Dementyev. He worked in the biology department of Moscow State University and my mother had insisted that he would look after me. Surely it wouldn't be so hard to find him. The worst of my troubles might already be over. That was what I tried to tell myself.

The station was jammed. I had never seen so many people in one place. As I stepped down from the train, I found myself on a platform that seemed to stretch on for ever, with passengers milling about everywhere, carrying suitcases, packages, bundles of clothes, some of them chewing on sandwiches, others emptying their hip-flasks. Everyone was tired and grimy. There were policemen too but I didn't think they were looking for me. I had taken off the porter's cap and jacket and abandoned the suitcases. Once again I was wearing my Young Pioneers outfit, although I thought of getting rid of that too. It was quite warm in Moscow. The air felt heavy and smelt of oil and smoke.

I allowed myself to be swept along, following the crowd through a vast ticket hall, larger than any room I had ever seen, and out into the street. I found myself standing on the edge of a square. Again, it was the size that struck me first. To my eyes, this one single space was as big as the whole of Kirsk. It had lanes of traffic and cars, buses, trams roaring past in every direction. Traffic – the very notion of a traffic jam – was a new experience for me and I was overwhelmed by the noise and the stench of the exhaust fumes. Even today it sometimes surprises me that people are willing to put up with it. The cars were every colour imaginable. I had seen official Chaikas and Ladas but it was as if these vehicles had driven here from every country in the world. Grey taxis with chessboard patterns on their hoods dodged in and out of the different lines. Subways had been built for pedestrians, which was just as well. Trying to cross on the surface would have been suicide.

There were three separate railway stations in the square, each one

trying to outdo the other with soaring pillars, archways and towers. Travellers were arriving from different parts of Russia and as soon as they emerged they were greeted by all sorts of food stalls, mainly run by wrinkled old women in white aprons and hats. In fact people were selling everything ... meat, vegetables, Chinese jeans and padded jackets, electrical goods, their own furniture. Some of them must have come off the train for no other reason. Nobody had any money. This was where you had to start.

My own needs were simple and immediate. I was dizzy with hunger. I headed to the nearest food stall and started with a small pie filled with cabbage and meat. I followed it with a currant bun – we called them *kalerikas* and they were specially made to fill you up. Then I bought a drink from a machine that squirted syrup and fizzy water into a glass. It still wasn't enough. I had another and then a raspberry ice cream that I bought for seven kopecks. The lady beamed at me as she handed it over ... as if she knew it was something special. I remember the taste of it to this day.

It was as I finished the last spoonful that I realized I was being watched. There was a boy of about seventeen or eighteen leaning against a lamp-post, examining me. He was the same height as me but more thickly set with muddy eyes and long, very straight, almost colourless hair. He would have been handsome but at some time his nose had been broken and it had set unevenly, giving his whole face an unnatural slant. He was wearing a black leather jacket which was much too big for him, the sleeves rolled back so that they wouldn't cover his hands. Perhaps he had stolen it. Nobody was coming anywhere near him. Even the travellers seemed to avoid him. From the way he was standing there, you would think he owned the pavement and perhaps half the city. I quite liked that, the way he had nothing but pretended otherwise.

As I gazed around me, I realized that there were quite a lot of children outside Kazansky station, most of them huddling together in groups close to the entrance without daring to go inside. These children looked much less well off than the boy in the leather jacket; emaciated with pale skin and hollow eyes. Some of them were trying

to beg from the arriving passengers but they were doing it half-heartedly, as if they were nervous of being seen. I saw a couple of tiny boys who couldn't have been more than ten years old, homeless and half starved. I felt ashamed. What would they have been thinking as they watched me gorge myself? I was tempted to go over and give them a few kopecks but before I could move, the older boy suddenly walked forward and stood in front of me. There was something about his manner that unnerved me. He seemed to be smiling at some private joke. Did he know who I was, where I had come from? I got the feeling that he knew everything about me, even though we had never met.

"Hello, soldier," he said. He was referring, of course, to my Young Pioneers outfit. "Where have you come from?"

"From Kirsk," I said.

"Never heard of it. Nice place?"

"It's all right."

"First time in Moscow?"

"No. I've been here before."

I had a feeling he knew straight away that I was lying, like the policemen in Kirsk. But he just smiled in that odd way of his. "You got somewhere to stay?"

"I have a friend..."

"It's good to have a friend. We all need friends." He looked around the square. "But I don't see anyone."

"He's not here."

It reminded me of my first day at senior school. I was trying to sound confident but I was completely defenceless and he knew it. He examined me more closely, weighing up various possibilities, then suddenly he straightened up and stretched out a hand. "Relax, soldier," he said. "I don't want to give you any hassle. I'm Dimitry. You can call me Dima."

I took his hand. I couldn't really refuse it. "I'm Yasha," I said.

We shook.

"Welcome to Moscow," he said. "Welcome back, I should say. So when were you last here?"

“It was a while ago,” I said. I knew that the more I spoke, the more I would give away. “It was with my parents,” I added.

“But this time you’re on your own.”

“Yes.”

The single word hung in the air.

It was hard to make out what Dima had in mind. On the one hand he seemed friendly enough, but on the other, I could sense him unravelling me. It was that broken nose of his. It made it very difficult to read his face. “This person I’m supposed to be meeting...” I said. “He’s a friend of my parents. He works at the University of Moscow. I don’t suppose you know how to get there?”

“The university? It’s a long way from this part of town but it’s quite easy. You can take the Metro.” His hand slipped over my shoulder. Before I knew it, we were walking together. “The entrance is over here. There’s a direct line that runs all the way there. The station you want is called Universitet. Do you have any money?”

“Not much,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter. The Metro’s cheap. In fact, I’ll tell you what...” He reached out and a coin appeared at his fingertips as if he had plucked it out of the air. “Here’s five kopecks. It’s all you need. And don’t worry about paying me back. Always happy to help someone new to town.”

We had arrived at a staircase leading underground and to my surprise he began to walk down with me. Was he going to come the whole way? His hand was still on my shoulder and as we went he was telling me about the journey.

“Nine stops, maybe ten. Just stay on the train and you’ll be there in no time...”

As he spoke, a set of swing doors opened in front of us and two more boys appeared, coming up the steps. They were about the same age as Dima, one dark, the other fair. I expected them to move aside – but they didn’t. They barged into me and for a moment I was sandwiched between them with Dima still behind to me. I thought they were going to attack me but they were gone as suddenly as they’d arrived.

“Watch out!” Dima shouted. He twisted round and called out after them. “Why don’t you look where you’re going?” He turned back to me. “That’s how people are in this city. Always in a hurry and to hell with everyone else.”

The boys had gone and we said no more about it. Dima took me as far as the barriers. “Good luck, soldier,” he said. “I hope you find who you’re looking for.”

We shook hands again.

“Remember – Universitet.” With a cheerful wave, he ambled away, leaving me on my own. I walked forward and stopped in front of the escalator.

I had never seen anything like it. Stairs that moved, that carried people up and down in an endless stream. They seemed to go on and on, and I couldn’t believe that the railway lines had been laid so deep. Cautiously, I stepped onto it and found myself clinging onto the handrail, being carried down as if into the bowels of the earth. At the very bottom, there was a uniformed woman in a glass box. Her job was simply to watch the passengers, to make sure that nobody tripped over and hurt themselves. I couldn’t imagine what it must be like to work here all day, buried underground, never seeing the sun.

The Moscow Metro was famous all over Russia. It had been built by workers from every part of the country and famous artists had been brought in to decorate it. Each station was spectacular in its own way. This one had gold-coloured pillars, a mosaic floor and glass spheres hanging from the ceiling blazing with light. To the thousands of passengers who used it, it was nothing – simply a way of getting around – but I was amazed. A train came roaring out of the tunnel almost immediately. I got on and a moment later the doors slammed shut. With a jolt, the train moved off.

I took a spare seat – and it was as I sat down that I knew that something was wrong. I reached back and patted my trouser pocket. It was empty. I had been robbed. All my money had gone apart from a few coins. I played back what had happened and realized that I had been set up from the start. Dima had seen me paying for the food. He knew I had cash. Somehow he must have signalled to the two other

boys and sent them into the station through another entrance. He'd kept me talking just long enough and then he'd led me down the steps and straight into their arms. It was a professional job and one they had probably done a hundred times before. My anger was as black as the tunnel we'd plunged into. I had lost more than seventy rubles! My parents had saved that money. They had thought it would save me. But I had stupidly, blindly allowed it to be taken away from me. What a fool I was! I didn't deserve to survive.

But sitting there, being swept along beneath the city, I decided that perhaps it didn't matter after all. Even as the train was carrying me forward, I could put it all behind me. I was going to meet Misha Dementyev and he would look after me. I didn't actually need the money any more. Looking back now, I would say that this was one of the first valuable lessons I learnt, and one that would be useful in my future line of work. Sometimes things go wrong. It is inevitable. But it is a mistake to waste time and energy worrying about events that you cannot influence. Once they have happened, let them go.

What was I expecting the university to be like? In my mind, I had seen a single building like my school, only bigger. But instead, when I came out of the station, I found a city within the city, an entire neighbourhood devoted to learning. It was much more spacious and elegant than anything I had so far seen of Moscow. There were boulevards and parks, special buses to carry the students in and out, lawns and fountains, and not one building but dozens of them, evenly spaced, each one in its own domain. It was all dominated by one of Stalin's skyscrapers, and as I stood in front of it I saw how it had been designed to make you feel tiny, to remind you of the power and the majesty of the state. Standing in front of the steps that led to the front doors – hidden behind a row of columns – I felt like the world's worst sinner about to enter a church. But at the same time, the building had a magnetic attraction. I had no idea where the biology department was. But this was the heart of the university. I would find Misha Dementyev here. I climbed the steps and went in.

The inside of the building didn't seem to fit what I had seen outside. It was like stepping into a submarine or a ship with no windows, no

views. The ceilings were low. It was too warm. Corridors led to more corridors. Doors opened onto other doors. Staircases sprouted in every direction. Students marched past me on all sides, carrying their books and their backpacks, and I forced myself to keep moving, knowing that if I stopped and looked lost it would be a sure way to get noticed. It seemed to me that if there was an administrative area, an office with the names of all the people working at the university, it would be somewhere close to the entrance. Surely the university wouldn't want casual visitors to plunge too far into the building or to take one of the lifts up to the fortieth or fiftieth floor? I tried a door. It was locked. The next one opened into a toilet. Next to it there was a bare room, occupied by a cleaner with a mop and a cigarette.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"The administration office."

She looked at me balefully. "That way. On the left. Room 1117."

The corridor went on for about a hundred metres but the door marked 1117 was only halfway down. I knocked and went in.

There were two more women sitting at desks which were far too small for the typewriters, piles of paper, files and ashtrays that covered them. One of the women was plugged into an old-fashioned telephone system, the sort with wires looping everywhere, but she glanced up as I came in.

"Yes?" she demanded.

"Can you help me?" I asked. "I'm looking for someone."

"You need the student office. That's room 1301."

"I'm not looking for a student. I need to speak to a professor. His name is Misha Dementyev."

"Room 2425 – the twenty-fourth floor. Take the lift at the end of the corridor."

I felt a surge of relief. He was here! He was in his office! At that moment, I saw the end of my journey and the start of a new life. This man had known my parents. Now he would help me.

I took the lift to the twenty-fourth floor, sharing it with different groups of students who all looked purposefully grubby and dishevelled. I had been in a lift before and this old-fashioned steel

box, which shuddered and stopped at least a dozen times, had none of the wonders of the escalator on the Metro. Finally I arrived at the floor I wanted. I stepped out and followed a cream-coloured corridor that, like the ground floor, had no windows. At least the offices were clearly labelled and I found the one I wanted right at the corner. The door was open as I approached and I heard a man speaking on the telephone.

“Yes, of course, Mr Sharkovsky,” he was saying. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

I knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

I entered a small, cluttered room with a single, square window looking out over the main avenue and the steps that had first brought me into the building. There must have been five or six hundred books there, not just lined up along the shelves but stacked up on the floor and every available surface. They were fighting for space with a whole range of laboratory equipment, different-sized flasks, two microscopes, scales, Bunsen burners, and boxes that looked like miniature ovens or fridges. Most unnerving of all, a complete human skeleton stood in a frame in one corner as if it were here to guard all this paraphernalia while its owner was away.

The man was sitting at his desk. He had just put down the phone as I came in. My first impression was that he was about the same age as my father, with thick black hair that only emphasized the round bald patch in the middle of his head. The skin here was stretched tight and polished, reflecting the ceiling light. He had a heavy beard and moustache, and as he examined me from behind a pair of glasses, I saw small, anxious eyes blinking at me as if he had never seen a boy before – or had certainly never allowed one into his office.

Actually, I was wrong about this. He was nervous because he knew who I was. He spoke my name immediately. “Yasha?”

“Are you Mr Dementyev?” I asked.

“Professor Dementyev,” he replied. “Please, come in. Close the door. Does anyone know you’re here?”

“I asked in the administration room downstairs,” I said.

“You spoke to Anna?” I had no idea what the woman’s name was. He didn’t let me reply. “That’s a great pity. It would have been much better if you had telephoned me before you came. How *did* you get here?”

“I came by train. My parents—”

“I know what has happened in Estrov.” He was agitated. Suddenly there were beads of sweat on the crown of his head. I could see them glistening. “You cannot stay here, Yasha,” he said. “It’s too dangerous.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “My parents said you’d look after me!”

“And I will! Of course I will!” He tried to smile at me but he was full of nervous energy and he was allowing his different thought processes to tumble over each other. “Sit down, Yasha, please!” He pointed to a chair. “I’m sorry but you’ve taken me completely by surprise. Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Can I get you something?” Before I could answer, he snatched up the telephone again. “There’s somebody I know,” he explained to me. “He’s a friend. He can help you. I’m going to ask him to come.”

He dialled a number and as I sat down facing him, uncomfortably close to the skeleton, he spoke quickly into the receiver.

“It’s Dementyev. The boy is here. Yes ... here at the university.” He paused while the person at the other end spoke to him. “We haven’t had a chance to speak yet. I thought I should let you know at once.” He was answering a question I hadn’t heard. “He seems all right. Unharmd, yes. We’ll wait for you here.”

He put the phone down and it seemed to me that he was suddenly less agitated than he had been when I had arrived – as if he had done what was expected of him. For some reason, I was feeling uneasy. By the look of it, Professor Dementyev wasn’t pleased to see me. I was a danger to him. This was my parents’ closest friend but I was beginning to wonder how much that friendship was worth.

“How did you know who I was?” I asked.

“I’ve been expecting you, ever since I heard about what happened. And I recognized you, Yasha. You look very much like your mother. I

saw the two of you together a few times when you were very young. You won't remember me. It was before your parents left Moscow."

"Why did they leave? What happened? You worked with them."

"I worked with your father. Yes."

"Do you know that he's dead?"

"I didn't know for certain. I'm sorry to hear it. He and I were friends."

"So tell me—"

"Are you sure I can't get you something?"

I had eaten and drunk everything I needed at Kazansky Station. What I really wanted was to be away from here. I have to say that I was disappointed by Misha Dementyev. I'm not sure what I'd been expecting, but maybe he could have been more affectionate, like a long-lost uncle or something? He hadn't even come out from behind his desk.

"What happened?" I asked again. "Why was my father sent to work in Estrov?"

"I can't go through all that now." He was flustered again. "Later..."

"Please, Professor Dementyev!"

"All right. All right." He looked at me as if he was wondering if he could trust me. Then he began. "Your father was a genius. He and I worked here together in this department. We were young students; idealists, excited. We were researching endospores ... and one in particular. Anthrax. I don't suppose you know very much about that."

"I know about anthrax," I said.

"We thought we could change the world ... your father especially. He was looking at ways to prevent the infection of sheep and cattle. But there was an accident. Working in the laboratory together, we created a form of anthrax that was much faster and deadlier than anything anyone had ever known. It had no cure. Antibiotics were useless against it."

"It was a weapon?"

"That wasn't our intention. That wasn't what we wanted. But – yes. It was the perfect biological weapon. And of course the government found out about it. Everything that happens in this place they know

about. It was true then. It's true now. They heard about our work here and they came to us and ordered us to develop it for military use." Dementyev took out a handkerchief and used it to polish the lenses of his glasses. He put them back on. "Your father refused. It was the last thing he wanted. So they started to put the pressure on. They threatened him. And that was when he did something incredibly brave ... or incredibly stupid. He went to a journalist and tried to get the story into the newspapers.

"He was arrested at once. I was here, in the laboratory, when they marched him away. They arrested your mother too."

"How old was I?" I asked.

"You were two. And – I'm sorry, Yasha – they used you to get at your parents. That was how they worked. It was very simple. If your parents didn't do what they were told, they would never see you again. What choice did they have? They were sent to Estrov, to work in the factory. They were forced to produce the new anthrax. That was the deal. Stay silent. And live."

So everything – my parents' life or their non-life as prisoners in a remote village, the little house, the boredom and the poverty – had been for me. I wasn't sure how that made me feel. Was I to blame for everything that had happened? Was I the one who had destroyed their lives?

"Yasha..." Dementyev stood up and came over to me. He was much taller than I had expected now that he was on his feet. He loomed over me. "Were you inoculated?" he asked.

I nodded. "My parents were shot at when they escaped. But they stole a syringe. They injected me."

"I knew your father had been working on an antidote. Thank God! But I guessed it the moment I saw you. Otherwise you would have been dead a long time ago."

"My best friend died," I said.

"I'm so sorry. Anton and Eva – your parents – were my friends too."

We fell silent. He was still standing there, one hand on the back of my chair.

"What will happen to me?" I asked.

“You don’t need to worry any more, Yasha. You’ll be well looked after.”

“Who was that you called?”

“It was a friend. Someone we can trust. He’ll be here very soon.”

There was something wrong. Things that he’d told me just didn’t add up. I was about to speak when I heard the sound of sirens, police cars approaching, still far away but drawing nearer. And I knew instantly that there was no friend, that Dementyev had called them. It wasn’t detective work. I could have asked him why my parents had been sent to live in Estrov while he had been allowed to stay here. I could have played back the conversation he’d had on the telephone, how he had referred to me simply as “the boy”. Not Yasha. Not Anton’s son. The people at the other end knew who I was because they’d been expecting me to show up, waiting for me. I could have worked it out but I didn’t need to. I saw it all in his eyes.

“Why?” I asked.

He didn’t even try to deny it. “I’m sorry, Yasha,” he said. “But nobody can know. We have to keep it secret.”

We. The factory managers. The helicopter pilots. The militia. The government. And Dementyev. They were all in it together.

I scrambled to my feet – or tried to. But Dementyev was ahead of me. He pounced down, his hands on my shoulders, using his weight to pin me to the seat. For a moment his face was close to mine, the eyes staring at me through the thick lenses.

“There’s nowhere you can go!” he hissed. “I promise you ... they won’t treat you badly.”

“They’ll kill me!” I shouted back. “They killed everyone!”

“I’ll talk to them. They’ll take you somewhere safe...”

Yes. I saw it already. A prison or a mental asylum, somewhere I’d never be seen again.

I couldn’t move. Dementyev was too strong for me. And the police cars were getting closer. We were twenty-four floors up but I could hear the sirens cutting through the air. And then I had an idea. I forced myself to relax.

“You can’t do this!” I exclaimed. “My father gave me something for

you. He said it was very valuable. He said if I gave it to you, you'd have to help me."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It's in a bag. It's in my pocket!"

"Show me."

He let go of one of my shoulders ... but only one of them. I still couldn't wrench myself free. I was sitting down. He was standing over me and he was twice my size.

"Take it out," he said.

The police must have turned into the main university drive. I heard car doors slam shut.

Using my one free arm, I drew out the black bag that my mother had given me. At least Dima and his friends hadn't stolen it when they took my money. I placed it on the desk. And it worked just as I'd hoped. Dementyev still didn't let go of me but his grip loosened as he reached out and opened the bag. I saw his face change as he tipped out the contents.

"What...?" he began.

I jerked myself free, throwing the chair backwards. As it toppled over, I managed to get to my feet. Dementyev swung round but he was too late to stop me lashing out with my fist. I knocked the glasses off his face. He fell back against the desk but then recovered and seized hold of me again. I needed a weapon and there was only one that I could see. I reached out and grabbed the arm of the skeleton, wrenching it free from the shoulder. The hand and the wrist dangled down but I hung onto the upper bone – the humerus – and used it as a club, smashing it against Dementyev's head again and again until, with a howl, he fell back. I twisted away. Dementyev had crumpled over the desk. There was blood streaming down his face.

"It's too late..." he stammered. "You won't get away."

I snatched back the jewellery and tumbled out of the office. There was nobody outside. Surely someone must have heard what had happened? I didn't want to know. I ran to the lift. It was already on the way up and it took me a few seconds to work out that the police were almost certainly inside, travelling towards me. And I might have

been caught standing there, waiting for them! I continued down the corridor and found a fire exit – leading to twenty-four flights of stairs. I didn't stop until I reached the bottom and it was only then that I realized I was still carrying the skeleton's arm. I found a dustbin, picked up some loose papers and dropped the arm in.

As I walked down the steps at the front door, I saw three police cars parked there with their lights flashing. I pretended to be immersed in the papers I had taken. If there were any policemen outside, I would look like one more of the countless students coming in and out.

But nobody stopped me. I hurried back to the station with just one thought in my head. I was alone in Moscow with no money.

ТВЕРСКАЯ

I went back to Kazansky Station.

In a way, it was a mad decision. The police knew I was in Moscow and they would certainly be watching all the major stations – just as they had in Rosna and Kirsk. But I wasn't leaving. The truth was that in the whole of Russia, I had nowhere to go and no one to look after me. I couldn't go back to Estrov, obviously, and although I remembered my mother once telling me that she had relations in a city called Kazan, I had no idea where it was or how to get there.

No, it was much better to stay in Moscow, but first of all I would need to change my appearance. That was easy enough. I stripped off my Pioneer uniform and dumped it in a bin. Then I got my hair cut short. Although the bulk of my money had gone, I had managed to find eighteen kopecks scattered through my pockets and I used nine of them at a barber's shop, a dank little place in a backstreet with old hair strewn over the floor. As I stepped out again, feeling the unfamiliar cool of the breeze on my head and the back of my neck, a police car rushed past – but I wasn't worried. Even today, I am aware of how little you need to change to lose yourself in a city. A haircut, different clothes, perhaps a pair of sunglasses ... it is enough.

I still had enough kopecks for the return journey and as I sat once again in the Metro, I tried to work out some sort of plan. The most immediate problem was accommodation. Where would I sleep when night came? If I stayed out on the street, I would be at my most vulnerable. And then there was the question of food. Without money, I couldn't eat. Of course, I could steal but the one thing I most dreaded was falling back into the hands of the police. If they recognized me, I was finished. And even if they didn't, I had heard enough stories about the prison camps all over Russia, built specially for children. Did I want to end up with the rest of my hair shaved off,

stuck behind barbed wire in the middle of nowhere? There were thousands of Russian boys whose lives were exactly that.

This time I barely even noticed the stations, no matter how superbly they were decorated. I was utterly miserable. My parents had believed in Misha Dementyev and they had sent me to him, even though it had cost them their lives. But the moment I had walked into his office, he had thought only of saving his own skin. It seemed to me that there was nobody in the world I could trust. Even Dima, the boy I had met when I got off the train, had only been interested in robbing me.

But perhaps Dima was the answer.

The more I thought about it, the more I decided he might not be all bad. Certainly, when we had met, he had been pleasant enough, smiling and friendly, even if he was simply setting me up for his friends. But maybe I was partly to blame for what had happened, coming off the train and flashing my money around all the different stalls. Dima was living on the street. He had to survive. I'd made myself an obvious target and he'd done what he had to.

At the same time, I remembered what he'd said to me. *It's good to have a friend. We all need friends.* Could it be possible that he actually meant it? He was, after all, only a few years older than me and we were both in the same situation. Part of me knew that I was fooling myself. Dima was probably miles away by now, laughing at me for being such a fool. But at the end of the day, he was the only person in the city I actually knew. If I could find him again, perhaps I could persuade him to help me.

And there was something else. I still had my mother's jewels.

Half an hour later, I climbed up to street level and found myself back where I had begun. The women were still there at their food stalls but they almost seemed to be taunting me. Before, they had been welcoming. Now, all their pies and ice creams were beyond my reach. I found a bench and sat down, watching the crowds around me. Stations are strange places. When you pass through them, travelling somewhere, you barely notice them. They simply help you on your way. But stand outside with nowhere to go and they make

you feel worthless. You should not be here, they shout at you. If you are not a passenger, you do not belong here.

To start with, I did nothing at all. I just sat there, staring at the traffic, letting people stream past me on all sides. The children I had seen were still dotted around and I wondered what they would do with themselves when night fell. That could only be a few hours away. The light was barely changing, the sun trapped behind unbroken cloud, but there were already commuters arriving at the station, on their way home. There was no sign of Dima. In the end, I went over to a couple of boys, the ten-year-olds that I had seen before.

“Excuse me,” I said.

Two pairs of very sly and malevolent eyes turned on me. One of the children had snot running out of his nose. Both of them looked worn out, unhealthy.

“I’m looking for someone I was talking to earlier,” I went on. “He was wearing a black leather jacket. His name is Dima.”

The boys glanced at each other. “You got any money?” one of them asked.

“No.”

“Then get lost!” Those weren’t his actual words. This little boy, whose voice hadn’t even broken, used the filthiest language I’d ever heard. I saw that he had terrible teeth with gaps where half of them had fallen out. His friend hissed at me like an animal and at that moment the two of them weren’t children at all. They were like horrible old men, not even human. I was glad to leave them on their own.

I tried to ask some of the other street kids the same question but as I approached them, they moved away. It was as if they all knew that I was from out of town, that I wasn’t one of them, and for that reason they would have nothing to do with me. And now the light really was beginning to disappear. I was starting to feel the threat of nightfall and knew that I couldn’t stay here for much longer. I would have to find a doorway – or perhaps I could sleep in one of the subways beneath the streets. I had four kopecks left in my pocket. Barely

enough for a cup of hot tea.

And then, quite unexpectedly, I saw him. Dima – with his oversized leather jacket and his half-handsome, half-ugly face – had turned the corner, smoking a cigarette, flicking away the match. There was another boy with him and I recognized him too. He had been one of the two who had robbed me. Dima said something and they laughed. It looked as if they were heading for the Metro, presumably on their way home.

I didn't hesitate. It was now or never. I crossed the concourse in front of the station and stood in their path.

Dima saw me first and stopped with the cigarette halfway to his lips. I had taken him by surprise and he thought I was going to make trouble. I could see it at once. He was tense, wary. But I was completely relaxed. I'd already worked it out. He'd tricked me. He'd robbed me. But I had to treat him as my friend.

"Hi, Dima." I greeted him as if the three of us had arranged to meet here for coffee.

He smiled a little but he was still suspicious. And there was something else. I wasn't quite sure what it was but he was looking at me almost as if he had expected me to come back, as if there was something he knew that I didn't. "Soldier!" he exclaimed. "How are you doing? What happened to your hair?"

"I got it cut."

"Did you meet your friend?"

"No. He wasn't there. It seems he's left Moscow."

"That's too bad."

I nodded. "In fact, I've got a real problem. He was going to put me up but now I don't have anywhere to go."

I was hoping he might offer to help. That was the idea, anyway. Why not? He was seventy rubles richer than me. Thanks to him, I had nothing. He could at least have offered me a bed for the night. But he didn't speak and I realized I was wasting my time. He was street-hardened, the sort of person who would have never helped anyone in his life. His friend muttered something and pushed past me, disappearing into the Metro, but I stood my ground. "Can you help

me?” I said. “I just need somewhere to stay for a few nights.” And then – my last chance. “I can pay you.”

“You’ve got money?” That surprised him. He thought he’d taken it all already.

“Not any more,” I said. I shrugged as if to let him know that it didn’t matter, that I’d already forgotten about it. “But I’ve got this.” I went on. I took out the black velvet bag that my mother had given me and that I’d used to trick Dementyev. I opened it and poured the contents – the necklace, the ring and the earrings – into my hand. “There must be a pawnshop somewhere. I’ll sell them and then I can pay you for a room.”

Dima examined the jewellery, the brightly coloured stones in their silver and gold settings, and I could already see the light stirring in his eyes as he made the calculations. How much were they worth and how was he going to separate them from me? He dropped his cigarette and reached out, picking up one of the earrings. He let it hang from his finger and thumb. “This won’t get you much,” he said. “It’s cheap.”

Right then, I thought of my mother and I could feel the anger rising in my blood. I wanted to punch him but still I forced myself to stay calm. “I was told they were valuable,” I said. “That’s gold. And those stones are emeralds. Take me to a pawnshop and we can find out.”

“I don’t know...” He was pretending otherwise but he knew that the jewels were worth more than the money he had already stolen. “Give me the stuff and I’ll take it to a pawnbroker for you. But I don’t think you’ll get more than five rubles.”

He’d get fifty. I’d get five ... if I was lucky. I could see how his mind worked. I held out my hand and, reluctantly, he gave me the earring back. “I can find a pawnbroker on my own,” I said.

“There’s no need to be like that, soldier! I’m only trying to help.” He gave me a crooked smile, made all the more crooked by his broken nose. “Listen, I’ve got a room and you’re welcome to stay with me. You know ... we’re all friends, here in Moscow, right? But you’ll have to pay rent.”

“How much rent?”

“Two rubles a week.”

I pretended to consider. “I’ll have to see it first.”

“Whatever you say. We can go there now if you like.”

“Sure. Why not?”

He took me back down into the Metro. He even paid my fare again. I knew I was taking a risk. He could lead me to some faraway corner of the city, take me into an alleyway, put a knife into me and steal the jewels. But I had a feeling that wasn’t the way he worked. Dima was a hustler, a thief – but at the end of the day, he just didn’t have the look of someone who was ready to kill. He would get the jewellery in the end anyway. I would pay it to him as rent or he would steal it from me while I slept. My plan was simply to make myself useful to him, to become part of his gang. If I could do this quickly enough, he might let me stay with him, even when I had nothing more to give. That was my hope.

He took me to a place just off Tverskaya Street, one of the main thoroughfares in Moscow, which leads all the way down to the Kremlin and Red Square. Today, there is a hotel on that same corner – the nine-storey Marriott Grand, where American tourists stay in total luxury. But when I came there, following Dima and still wondering if I wasn’t making another bad mistake, it was very different. Moscow has changed so much, so quickly. It was another world back then.

Dima lived in what had once been a block of flats but which had long been abandoned and left to rot. All the colour had faded from the brickwork, which was damp and mouldy, and covered with graffiti – not artwork but political slogans, swear words, and the names of city football teams. The windows were so dirty that they looked more like rusting metal than glass. The building rose up twelve floors, three more than the hotel that would one day replace it, and whole thing seemed to be sagging in on itself, hardly bothering to stay upright. It was surrounded by other blocks that were similar ... they looked like old men standing out in the cold, having a last cigarette together before they died. The streets here were very narrow; more like alleyways, twisting together in the darkness,

covered with rubbish and mud. The block of flats had shops on the ground floor – an empty grocery store, a chemist and a massage parlour – but the further up you went, the more desolate it became. It had no lifts, of course. Just a concrete staircase that had been used as a toilet so many times that it stank. By the time you got to the top, there was no electricity, no proper heating. The only water came dribbling, cold, out of the taps.

We climbed up together. I noticed that Dima was wheezing when we got to the top and I wondered if he was ill – although it could just have been all those cigarettes. On the way, we passed a couple of people, a man and a woman, lying on top of each other, unconscious. I couldn't even be sure they were actually alive. Dima just stepped over them and I did the same, wondering what I was getting myself into. My village had been a place of poverty and hardship but it was somehow more shocking here, in the middle of a city.

Dima's room was on the eighth floor. Since there was no lighting, he had taken out a torch and used it to find the way. We went down a corridor that was missing its carpet with gaping holes showing the pipework and wiring. There were doors on either side, most of them locked, one or two reinforced with metal plating. Somewhere, I could hear a baby crying. A man shouted out a swear word. Another laughed. The sounds that echoed around me only added to the nightmare, the sense that I was being sucked into a dark and alien world.

"This is me," Dima said.

We'd come to a door marked with a number 83. Somebody had added DIMA'S PLACE in bright red letters but the paint hadn't been allowed to dry and it had trickled down like blood. Perhaps the effect was deliberate. There was a hole where the lock should have been but Dima used a padlock and a chain to keep the place secure. At the moment, it was hanging open. His friends had arrived ahead of us.

"Welcome home!" he said to me. "This is my place. Come in and meet my mates..."

He pushed the door open. We went in.

The flat was tiny. Most of it was in a single room, which he shared

with the two boys who had robbed me. On the floor were three mattresses and some filthy pillows on a carpet which was mouldy and colourless. The place was lit by candles and my first thought was that if one of them toppled over in the night, we would all burn to death. A single table and four chairs stood on one side. Otherwise there was no furniture of any description. A few bits of the kitchen were still in place but I could tell at a glance that the sink hadn't been used for years and without electricity the fridge was no more than an oversized cupboard. The smell in the room was unpleasant; a mixture of human sweat, unwashed clothes, dirt and decay.

Dima waved me over to the table. "This is Yasha," he announced. "He's going to be staying with us for a while." His two friends were already sitting there playing Snap with a deck that was so worn that the cards hung limp in their hands. They didn't look pleased as I joined them. "He's going to pay," Dima added. "Two rubles a week."

Dima opened the fridge and took out a bottle of vodka and some black bread. He found some dirty glasses in the sink and poured drinks for us all. He lit a cigarette for himself, then offered me one, which I accepted gratefully. It wasn't just that I wanted to smoke. It was a gesture of friendship and that was what I most needed.

Dima introduced the two boys. "This is Roman. That's Grigory." Roman was tall and thin. He looked as if he had been deliberately stretched. Grigory was round-faced, pock-marked with oily, black hair. All three of them looked not just adult but old, as if they had forgotten their true age ... which was about seventeen. Roman collected the cards and put them away. It was obvious who was the leader here. So long as Dima said I could stay, they weren't going to argue.

"Tell us about yourself, soldier," Dima said. "I'd like to know what brought you to Moscow." He winked at me. "And I'd particularly like to know why the police are so interested in you."

"What?"

So I'd been right. When I'd got back to the station I'd thought the children had been behaving strangely and now I knew why. The police had been there, looking for me.

“That’s right. Tell him, Grig.” Grigory said nothing so Dima went on. “They’re looking for someone new to town. Someone who might have come into Kazansky Station, dressed up like a Young Pioneer. They’ve been asking everyone.” He tapped ash. “They’re offering a reward for information.”

My heart sank. I wondered if I had walked into another trap. Had Dima invited me here to have me arrested? But there was no sound coming from outside; no footsteps in the corridor, no sirens in the street.

“Don’t worry, soldier! No one’s going to turn you in. Not even for the money. They never pay up anyway.

“I hate the p-p-p-police.” Roman had a stutter. I watched his face contort as he tried to spit out the last word.

“What do they want with you?” Grigory asked. He sounded hostile. Maybe he was afraid that I was bringing more trouble into his life. He probably had enough already.

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I didn’t want to lie but I was afraid of telling the truth. In the end, I kept it as short as I could. “They killed my parents,” I said. “My dad knew something he wasn’t meant to know. They wanted to kill me too. I escaped.”

“What about your friend at the university?” Dima asked.

“He wasn’t my friend.” I was on safer ground here. I told them everything that had happened in Misha Dementyev’s office. When I described how I had beaten Dementyev off using the arm of the skeleton, Dima laughed out loud. “I wish I’d seen that,” he said. “You certainly gave him the elbow!”

It was a weak joke but we all laughed. Dima refilled our glasses and once again we drank the Russian way, throwing the liquid back in a single gulp. It didn’t take us long to finish the bottle and about an hour later we all went to bed ... if you can call bed a square of carpet with a pile of old clothes as a pillow. I was just glad to have a roof over my head and, helped by the vodka, I was asleep almost at once.

The next morning, Dima took me to the pawnbroker he had mentioned. It was a tiny shop with a cracked front window and an old, half-shaven man sitting behind a counter that was stacked with

watches and jewellery. I handed across my mother's earrings and stood there, watching him examine them briefly through an eyeglass which he screwed into his face as if it was part of him. Right then, a little part of me died. It had been a pawnbroker that the hero had murdered in *Crime and Punishment*, the book I had been forced to read at school. I could almost have done the same.

He wanted to give me eight rubles for the earrings but Dima talked him up to twelve. The two of them knew each other well.

"You're a crook, Reznik," Dima scowled.

"And you're a thief, Dima," Reznik replied.

"One day someone will stick a knife in you."

"I don't mind. So long as they buy it from me first."

Dima took the money and we went back out into the sunlight. He gave me three rubles, keeping nine for himself, and when I looked down reproachfully at the crumpled notes he clapped me on the back. "That's three weeks' rent, soldier," he said.

"What about the other three rubles?"

"That's my commission. If you hadn't had me with you, that old crook would have ripped you off."

I'd been ripped off anyway but I didn't complain. Dima had said I could stay with him for three weeks. It was exactly what I wanted to hear.

"Let's get some breakfast!" he said.

We ate breakfast in the smallest, grimmest restaurant it would be possible to imagine. Somehow, I ended up paying for that too.

So began my stay in Moscow. I adapted very quickly to the way of life. The truth is that nobody did anything very much. They stole, they ate, they survived. I spent long hours outside the station with Dima, Roman and Grigory. The two boys didn't warm to me but gradually they began to accept that I was there. At the same time, Dima had made me his special project. I wondered if he might have had a younger brother at some time. He never spoke about his past life but that was how he treated me. When I write about him now, I still see him with the sleeves of his precious leather jacket falling over his hands, his smile, the way he swaggered along the street, and I

wonder if he is alive or dead. Dead most probably. Homeless kids in Moscow never survived long.

Dima taught me how to beg. You had to be careful because if the police saw you they would pick you up and throw you into jail. But my fair hair, and the fact that I looked so young, helped. If I stood outside the Bolshoi Theatre at night, I could earn as much as five rubles from the rich people coming out. There were tourists in Red Square and I would position myself outside St Basil's Cathedral with its towers and twisting, multicoloured domes. I didn't even have to speak. Once, an American gave me five dollars, which I passed on to Dima. He gave me fifty kopecks back but that was his own special exchange rate. I knew it was worth a lot more.

I got used to the city. Streets that had seemed huge and threatening became familiar. I could find my way around on the Metro. I visited Lenin, lying dead in his tomb, although Dima told me that most of the body was made of wax. I also saw the grave of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. Not that he meant anything to me now. I went to the big shops – GUM department store and Yeliseev's Food Hall and stared at all the amazing food I would never be able to afford. Just once, I visited a bathhouse near the Bolshoi and enjoyed the total luxury of sitting in the steam, breathing in the scent of eucalyptus leaves and feeling warm and clean.

And I stole.

We needed to buy food, cigarettes and – most importantly – vodka. It sometimes seemed that it was impossible to live in Tverskaya without alcohol and every night there were terrible arguments when somebody's bottle was finished. We would hear the screams and the knife fights, and the next day there would often be fresh blood on the stairs. Those who couldn't afford vodka got high on shoe polish. I'm not lying. They would spread it on bread and place it on a hot pipe, then breathe in the fumes.

No matter how much time I spent begging, we never had enough money and I wasn't surprised to find myself back at Reznik's, the pawnshop. With Dima's help, I got fifteen rubles for my mother's necklace; more than the earrings but less than I'd hoped. I was

determined not to part with her ring. It was the only memory of her that I had left.

And so, inevitably, I turned to crime. One of Dima's favourite tricks was to hang around outside an expensive shop, watching as the customers came out with their groceries. He would wait while they loaded up their car, then either Roman or Grigory would distract them while he snatched as much as he could out of the boot and then ran for it. I watched the operation a couple of times before Dima let me play the part of the decoy. Because I was so much younger than the other two boys, people were more sympathetic – and less suspicious. I would go up to them and pretend to be lost while Dima sneaked up to the back of their car.

The first three times, it worked perfectly and we found ourselves eating all sorts of things that we'd never tasted before. Roman and Grigory were getting used to me now. We'd begun playing cards together – a game that every Russian knows, called *Durak* or Fool. They'd even found a mattress for me. It wasn't a lot softer than the floor and it was infested with insects, but I still appreciated the gesture.

The fourth time, however, was almost a disaster. And it changed everything.

It was the usual set-up. We were outside a shop in a quiet street. It was an area we hadn't been to before. Our target was a chauffeur, obviously working for some big businessman who could afford to entertain. His car was a Daimler and there was enough food in the back to keep us going for a month. As usual, I went up to the man and, looking as innocent as possible, tried to engage him in conversation.

“Can you help me? I'm looking for Pushkin Square...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dima scurry up the pavement and disappear behind the raised door of the boot.

The chauffeur glared at me. “Get lost!”

“I am lost! I need to get to Pushkin Square...”

All I had to do was keep up the conversation for about thirty seconds. By the end of that time, Dima would have gone and two or

three bags would have gone with him. But suddenly I heard him cry out and I saw, with complete horror, that a policeman had appeared out of nowhere. To this day I don't know where he had come from because we always checked the immediate area first, but I can only assume that he'd been expecting us, that the police must have decided to crack down on this sort of street theft and that he had been lying in wait all along. He was a huge man with the neck and the shoulders of a professional weightlifter. Dima was squirming in his jacket but he was like a fish caught in a net.

I saw the chauffeur making a grab for me but I ducked under his arms and ran round the back of the car. There was nothing I could do for Dima. The only sensible thing was to run away and leave him and just be thankful I'd had a lucky escape. But I couldn't do it. Despite everything, I was grateful to him. I had been with him for six weeks now and he had protected me. I couldn't have survived without him. I owed him something.

I threw myself at the policeman, who reacted in astonishment. I was honestly less than half his size and I barely even knocked him off balance. He didn't let go of Dima ... if anything he tightened his grip, bellowing at the chauffeur to come and join in. Dima lashed out with a fist but the policeman didn't feel it. With his spare hand, he grabbed hold of my shirt so that we were both held captive and, seeing us unarmed and helpless, the chauffeur lumbered forward to help.

We would certainly have been taken prisoner and that would have been the end of my Moscow adventure. Indeed, if I were recognized, it might be the end of my life. But as I struggled, I saw that one of the shopping bags had fallen over, spilling out its contents. There was a plastic bag of red powder on the top. I snatched it up, split it open and hurled it into the policeman's face, all in a single movement.

It was chilli powder. The policeman was instantly blinded and howled in pain, both hands rushing to cover his eyes. Dima was forgotten. In fact everything was forgotten. The policeman's head was covered in red powder. He was spinning round on his feet. I grabbed Dima and the two of us began to run. At the same moment, a police car appeared at the far end of the street, speeding towards us, its

lights blazing. We ran across the pavement and down a narrow alleyway between two shops. It was a cul-de-sac, blocked at the far end by a wall. We didn't let it stop us, not for a second. We simply sprinted up the brickwork and over the top, crashing down onto an assortment of dustbins and cardboard boxes on the other side. Dima rolled over then got back on his feet. We could hear the siren behind us and knew that the police were only seconds away. We kept running – down another alleyway and across a main road with six lanes of traffic and cars, trucks, motorbikes and buses bearing down on us from every direction. It's a miracle we weren't killed. As it was, one car swerved out of our way and there was a screech and a crumpling of metal as a second car crashed into it. We didn't slow down. We didn't look back. We must have run half a mile across Moscow, ducking into side roads, chasing behind buildings, doing everything we could to keep out of sight. Eventually we came to a Metro entrance and darted into it, disappearing underground. There was a train waiting at the platform. We didn't care where it was going. We dived in and sank, exhausted, into two seats.

Neither of us spoke again until we got back to our own station and climbed back up to our familiar streets. We didn't go to the flat straight away. Dima took me to a coffee house and we bought a couple of glasses of *kvass*, a sweet, watery drink made from bread.

We sat next to the window. We were both still out of breath. I could hear Dima's lungs rattling. Climbing the stairs was enough exercise for him and he had just run a marathon.

"Thank you, soldier," he said eventually.

"We were unlucky," I said.

"I was lucky you were there. You could have just left me."

I didn't say anything.

"I hate this stupid city," Dima said. "I never wanted to come here."

"Why did you?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, then pointed to his broken nose. "My dad did this to me when I was six years old. He threw me out when I was seven. I ended up in an orphanage in Yaroslav and that was a horrible place ... horrible. You don't want to know." He took out a

cigarette and lit it. “They used to tie the kids down to the beds, the troublemakers. They left them there until they were covered in their own dirt. And the noise! The screaming, the crying... It never stopped. I think half of them were mad.”

“Were you adopted?” I asked.

“Nobody wanted me. Not the way I looked. I ran away. Got out of Yaroslav and ended up on a train to Moscow ... just like you.”

He fell silent.

“There’s something I want you to know,” he said. “That first day we met, at Kazansky Station.” He took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled blue smoke. “We took your money. It was Roman, Grig and me. We set you up.”

“I know,” I said.

He looked at me. “I thought you must have. But now I’m admitting it ... OK?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I went on. “I’d have done the same.”

“I don’t think so, soldier. You’re not the same as us.”

“I like being with you,” I said. “But there’s something I want to ask.”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you mind not calling me ‘soldier’?”

He nodded. “Whatever you say, Yasha.”

He patted me on the shoulder. We finished our drinks, stood up and went home. And it seemed to me that I’d actually done what I’d set out to do. The two of us were friends.

ФОРТОЧНИК

FORTOCHNIK

For the next few days, we barely left the flat. Dima was worried the police would be looking for us and I also had my concerns. Forget Estrov. I was now wanted for theft and for assaulting a police officer. It was better for us not to show our faces in the street and so we ate, drank, played cards ... and we were bored. We were also running out of cash. I never asked Dima what he had done with the rubles he had taken from me and it wasn't as if we were spending a lot of money but somehow there was never enough for our basic needs. Roman and Grigory brought in a few rubles now and then but the truth is that they were too unattractive to have much success begging and Roman's stutter made it hard for him to ask for money.

Even so, it was Roman who suggested it one night. "We should try b-b-b-burglary."

We were sitting around the table with vodka and cards. All we had eaten that day was a couple of slices of black bread. The four of us were looking ill. We needed proper food and sunlight. I had got used to the smell in the room by now – in fact I was part of it. But the place was looking grimier than ever and we longed to be outside.

"Who are we going to b-b-burgle?" Dima asked.

Roman shrugged.

"It's a good idea," Grigory said. He slapped down an attack card – we were having another bout of *Durak*. "Yasha is small enough. He could be our *fortochnik*."

"What's a *fortochnik*?" I asked.

Dima rolled his eyes. "It's someone who breaks in through a *fortochka*," he explained.

That, at least, I understood. A *fortochka* was a type of window. Many apartments in Moscow had them before air conditioning took over. There would be a large window and then a much smaller one

set inside it, a bit like a cat flap. In the summer months, people would open the *fortochkas* to let in the breeze and, of course, they were an invitation for thieves ... provided they were small enough. Grigory was right. He was too fat and Roman was too ungainly to crawl through, but I could make it easily. I was small for my age – and I'd lost so much weight that I was stick-thin.

“It is a good idea,” Dima agreed. “But we need an address. There's no point just breaking in anywhere, and anyway, it's too dangerous. His eyes brightened. “We can talk to Fagin!”

Fagin was an old soldier who lived three floors down in a room on his own. He had been in Afghanistan and had lost one eye and half his left arm – in action, he claimed, although there was a rumour he had been run over by a trolleybus while he was home on leave. Fagin wasn't his real name, of course but everyone called him that after a character in an English book, *Oliver Twist*. And the thing about Fagin was that he knew everything about everything. I never found out how he got his information but if a bank was about to move a load of money or a diamond merchant was about to visit a smart hotel, somehow Fagin would catch wind of it and he would pass the information on – at a price. Everyone in the block respected him. I had seen him a couple of times, a short, plump man with a huge beard bristling around his chin, shuffling along the corridors in a dirty coat, and I had thought he looked more like a tramp than a master criminal.

But now that Dima had thought of him, the decision had been made and the following day we gathered in his flat, which was the same size as ours but at least furnished with a sofa and a few pictures on the wall. He had electricity too. Fagin himself was a disgusting old man. The way he looked at us, you didn't really want to think about what was going on in his head. If Santa Claus had taken a dive into a sewer he would have come up looking much the same.

“You want to be *fortochniks*?” he asked, smiling to himself. “Then you want to do it soon before the winter comes and all the windows are closed! But you need an address. That's what you need, my boys. Somewhere worth the pickings!” He produced a leather notebook

with old bus tickets and receipts sticking out of the pages. He opened it and began to thumb through.

“How much is your share?” Dima asked.

“Always straight to the point, Dimitry. That’s what I like about you.” Fagin smiled. “Whatever you take, you bring to me. No lying! I know a lie when I hear one and, believe me, I’ll cut out your tongue.” He leered at us, showing the yellow slabs that were his teeth. “Sixty per cent for me, forty for you. Please don’t argue with me, Dimitry, dear boy. You won’t get better anywhere else. And I have the addresses. I know all the places where you won’t have any difficulty. Nice, slim boys, slipping in at night...”

“Fifty-fifty,” Dima said.

“Fagin doesn’t negotiate.” He found a page in his notebook. “Now here’s an address off Lubyanka Square. Ground-floor flat.” He looked up. “Shall I go on?”

Dima nodded. He had accepted the deal. “Where is it?”

“Mashkova Street. Number seven. It’s owned by a rich banker. He collects stamps. Many of them valuable.” He flicked the page over. “Maybe you’d prefer a house in the Old Arbat. Lots of antiques. Mind you, it was done over last spring and I’d say it was a bit early for a return visit.” Another page. “Ah yes. I’ve had my eye on this place for a while. It’s near Gorky Park ... fourth floor and quite an easy climb. Mind you, it’s owned by Vladimir Sharkovsky. Might be too much of a risk. How about Ilinka Street? Ah yes! That’s perfect. Nice and easy. Number sixteen. Plenty of cash, jewellery...”

“Tell me about the flat in Gorky Park,” I said.

Dima turned to me, surprised. But it was the name that had done it. Sharkovsky. I had heard it before. I remembered the time when I entered Dementyev’s office at Moscow State University. I had heard him talking on the telephone.

Yes, of course, Mr Sharkovsky. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

“Who is Sharkovsky?” I asked.

“He’s a businessman,” Fagin said. “But rich. Very, very rich. And quite dangerous, so I’m told. Not the sort of man you’d want to meet on a dark night and certainly not if you were stealing from him.”

“I want to go there,” I said.

“Why?” Dima asked.

“Because I know him. At least ... I heard his name.”

At that moment, it seemed almost like a gift. Misha Dementyev was my enemy. He had tried to hand me over to the police. He had lied to my parents. And it sounded as if he was working for this man, Sharkovsky – assuming it was the same Sharkovsky. So robbing his flat made perfect sense. It was like a miniature revenge.

Fagin snapped the notebook shut. We had made our decision and it didn't matter which address we chose. “It won't be so difficult,” he muttered. “Fourth floor. Quiet street. Sharkovsky doesn't actually live there. He keeps the place for a friend, an actress.” He leered at us in a way that suggested she was much more than a friend. “She's away a lot. It could be empty. I'll check.”

Fagin was as good as his word. The following day he provided us with the information we needed. The actress was performing in a play called *The Cherry Orchard* and wouldn't be back in Moscow until the end of the month. The flat was deserted but the *fortochka* was open.

“Go for the things you can carry,” he suggested. “Jewellery. Furs. Mink and sable are easy to shift. TVs and stuff like that ... leave them behind.”

We set off that same night, skirting round the walls of the Kremlin and crossing the river on the Krymsky Bridge. I thought I would be nervous. This was my first real crime – very different from the antics that Leo and I had got up to during the summer, setting off schoolboy bombs outside the police station or pinching cigarettes. Even stealing from the back of parked cars wasn't in the same league. But the strange thing was that I was completely calm. It struck me that I might have found my destiny. If I could learn to survive in Moscow by being a thief, that was the way it would have to be.

Gorky Park is a huge area on the edge of the Moscow River. With a fairground, boating lakes and even an open-air theatre, it's always been a favourite place for the people in the city. Anyone who had a flat here would have to be rich. The air was cleaner and if you were high enough you'd get views across the trees and over to the river,

where barges and pleasure boats cruised slowly past, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, another Stalin skyscraper, in the far distance. The flat that Fagin had identified was right next to the park in a quiet street that hardly seemed to belong to the city at all. It was too elegant. Too expensive.

We got there just before midnight but all the street lamps were lit and I was able to make out a very attractive building, made of cream-coloured stone, with arched doorways and windows and lots of decoration over the walls. It was smaller and neater than our apartment block, just four storeys high, with a slanting orange-tiled roof.

“That’s the window – up there.”

Dima pointed. The flat was on the top floor, just as Fagin had said, and sure enough I could make out the *fortochka*, which was actually slightly ajar. The woman who lived there might have thought she was safe, being so high up, but I saw at once that it would be possible to climb in, using the building’s adornments as footholds. There were ledges, windowsills, carved pillars and even a drainpipe that would act as one side of a ladder. It wouldn’t be easy for me but once I was inside I would go back down and open the front door. I’d let the others in and the whole place would be ours.

There were no lights on inside the building. The other residents must have been asleep. Nor was there anyone in the street. We crossed as quickly as we could and grouped ourselves in the shadows, right up against the wall.

“What do you think, Yasha?” Dima asked.

I looked up and nodded. “I can do it.” But still I hesitated. “Are you sure she’s away?”

“Everyone says Fagin is reliable.”

“OK.”

“We’ll be waiting for you at the door. Make sure you don’t make any noise coming down the stairs.”

“Right. Good luck.”

Dima cupped his hands to help me climb up to the first level and as I raised my foot, our eyes met and he smiled at me. But at that

moment I suddenly felt troubled. This might be my destiny but what would my parents have said if they could have seen me now? They were honest people. That was the way I'd been brought up. I was amazed at how quickly I'd become a burglar, a thief. And if I stayed in Moscow much longer? I wondered what I might become next.

I began the climb. The three boys scattered. We'd agreed that if a policeman happened to come along on patrol, Grigory would warn me by hooting like an owl. But right now we were alone and at first it was easy. I had the drainpipe on one side and there were plenty of bricks and swirling plasterwork to give me a foothold. The architect or the artist who had built this place might have had plenty of ideas about style and elegance but he had been less brilliant when it came to security.

Even so, the higher I went, the more dangerous it became. The pipe was quite loose. If I put too much weight onto it, I risked tearing it out of the wall. Some of the decorations were damp and had begun to rot. I rested my foot briefly on a diamond-shaped brick, part of a running pattern, and to my horror it crumbled away. First, there was the sound of loose plaster hitting the pavement. Then I found myself scrabbling against the face of the building, desperately trying to stop myself plunging down. If I'd fallen from the first floor, I'd have broken an ankle. From this height it was more likely to be my neck. Somehow I managed to steady myself. I looked down and saw Dima standing underneath one of the street lamps. He had seen what had happened and waved a hand – either spurring me on or warning me to be more careful.

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves, then continued up – past the third floor and up to the fourth. At one stage I was right next to a window and, peeping in, I saw the vague shape of two people lying in bed under a fur cover. I was lucky they were heavy sleepers. I pulled myself up as quickly as possible and finally reached the ledge that ran along the whole building just below the top floor. It was no more than fifteen centimetres wide and I had to squeeze flat against the wall, shuffling along with my toes touching the brickwork and my heels hanging in the air. If I had leaned back even slightly I would

have lost my balance and fallen. But I had come this far without killing myself. I was determined to see it through.

I got to the window with the smaller window set inside it and now I saw that I had two more problems. It was going to be an even tighter fit than I had imagined. And it was going to be awkward too. Somehow I had to lever myself up and in, but that would mean putting all my weight on the main sheet of glass. The windows were only separated by a narrow frame and unless I was careful there was a real chance they would shatter beneath me and I would end up being cut in half. Once again I looked for Dima but this time there was no sign of him.

I reached out and held onto the edge with one hand. The *fortochka* was definitely unlocked. The room on the other side was dark but seemed to be a lounge with a dining area and a kitchen attached. I grabbed the glass with my other hand. I saw now that I was going to have to go in head first. It just wasn't possible to lever up my leg. Using my forehead, I pushed the little window open. I leant forward, pushing my head inside. Now the glass was resting against the back of my neck, making me think of a prisoner in the old days, about to be decapitated by guillotine. Trying to keep as much of my weight off the glass as I could, I arched forward and in. The fit was very tight. The opening was barely more than forty centimetres square ... a cat flap indeed. My shoulders only just passed through and I felt the loose end of the glass scraping against my back. I pushed harder and found myself wedged with the lower rim of the *fortochka* pressing into my back just above my buttocks. Suddenly I was trapped! I couldn't move in either direction and I had a nightmare vision of being stuck there all night, waiting for someone to discover me and call the police in the morning. The glass was creaking underneath me. I was sure it was going to break. I pushed again. It was like giving birth to myself. The edge cut into me but then, somehow, gravity took over. I plunged forward into the darkness and hit the floor. I was in!

If it hadn't been for the carpet, I would have definitely broken my nose and ended up looking like Dima. If there was anyone in the flat, they would certainly have heard me and I lay there for a moment,

waiting for the door to open and the lights to go on. It didn't happen. I remembered the people I had seen beneath their fur cover in the flat below. Surely they would have heard the thump and wondered what it was. But there was no sound from below either. I waited another minute. My arm was sticking out at a strange angle and I was worried that I had dislocated my shoulder, but when I shifted my weight and got back into a sensible position, it seemed all right. Dima and the others would have seen me go in. They would be waiting for me to come down and open the front door. It was time to move.

First I examined my surroundings. As my eyes got used to the half-light, I saw that I was in the main living area and that the owner must have been as wealthy as Fagin had said. I had never been anywhere like this. The furniture was modern and looked brand new. Living in a wooden house in a village, I had never seen – I had never even imagined – glass and silver tables, leather sofas, and beautiful cabinets with rings hanging off the drawers. Everything I had ever sat on or slept in had been old and shabby. There was a gorgeous rug in front of a fireplace and even to steal that would make this adventure worthwhile. How much more comfortable I would be lying on a luxurious rug than on the lumpy mattress back at the Tverskaya Street apartment!

Paintings in gold frames hung on the walls. I didn't really understand them. They seemed to be splashes of paint with no subject matter at all. There had been a few framed photographs in my house, a tapestry hanging in my parents' bedroom, pictures cut out of magazines, but nothing like this. Next to the sitting area there was a dining-room table – an oval of wood, partly covered by a lace cloth, with four chairs – and beyond it a kitchen that was so clean it had surely never been used. I ran my eye over the electric oven, the sink with its gleaming taps. No need to run down to any wells if you lived here. There was a fridge in one corner. I opened the door and found myself bathed in electric light, staring at shelves stacked with ham, cheese, fruit, salad, pickled mushrooms and the little pancakes that we called *blinis*. I'm afraid I couldn't help myself. I reached in and stuffed as much food into my mouth as I could, not caring if it was

salty or sweet.

And that was how I was, standing in the kitchen with food in my hands and in my mouth, when there was the rattle of a key in the lock and the main door of the flat opened and the lights came on.

Fagin had got it wrong after all.

A man stood staring at me. I saw his eyes turn instantly from surprise to understanding and then to dark, seething fury. He was wearing a black fur coat, black gloves and the sort of hat you might see on an American gangster. A white silk scarf hung around his shoulders. He was not a huge man but he was solid and well built and he had a presence about him, a sense of power. I could see it in his extraordinarily intense eyes, heavy-lidded with thick, black eyebrows. His flesh had the colour and the vitality of a man lying dead in his coffin and standing there, framed in the doorway, he had that same, heavy stillness. His face was unlined, his mouth a narrow gash. I could make out the edges of a tattoo on the side of his neck: red flames. It suggested that the whole of his body, underneath his shirt, was on fire. Without knowing anything about him, I knew I was in terrible trouble. If I had met the devil I could not have been more afraid.

“Who is it, Vlad?” There was a woman standing behind him. I glimpsed a mink collar and blonde hair.

“There is someone in the flat,” he said. “A boy.”

His eyes briefly left me, darting across the room to the window. He didn't need to ask any questions. He knew how I had got in. He knew that I was alone.

“Do you want me to call the police?”

“No. There's no need for that.”

His words were measured, uttered with a sort of dull certainty. And they told me the worst thing possible. If he wasn't calling the police it was because he had decided to deal with me himself, and he wasn't going to shake my hand and thank me for coming. He was going to kill me. Perhaps there was a gun in his coat pocket. Perhaps he would tear me apart with his bare hands. I had no doubt at all that he could do it.

I didn't know how to react. My one desire was to get out of the flat, back into the street. I wondered if Dima, Roman and Grigory had seen what had happened but I knew that even if they had, there was nothing they could do. The front door would be locked. If they were sensible, they would probably be halfway back to Tverskaya Street. I tried to collect my thoughts. All I had to do was to get past this man and out into the corridor. The woman wouldn't try to stop me. I looked around me and did perhaps the most stupid thing I could have done. There was a bread knife on the counter. I picked it up.

The man didn't move. He didn't speak. He glanced at the blade with outrage. How could I dare to pick up *his* property and threaten him in *his* home? That was what he said without actually saying anything. Holding the knife didn't make me feel any stronger. In fact all the strength drained out of me the moment I had it in my hand and the silver, jagged blade filled me with horror.

"I don't want any trouble," I said and my voice didn't sound like my own. "Just let me go and nobody will be hurt."

He had no intention of doing that. He moved towards me and I jabbed out with the knife without thinking, not meaning to stab him, not really knowing what I was doing. He stopped. I saw the face of the girl behind him, frozen in shock. The man looked down. I followed his eyes and saw that the point of the blade had gone through his coat, into his chest. I was even more horrified. I stepped back, dropping the knife. It clattered to the floor.

The man didn't seem to have felt any pain. He brought up a hand and examined the gash in his coat as if it mattered more to him than the flesh underneath. When he brought his hand away, there was blood on the tips of his glove.

He gazed at me. I was unarmed now, trapped by those terrible eyes.

"What have you done?" he demanded.

"I..." I didn't know what to say.

He took one step forward and punched me in the face. I had never been struck so hard. I didn't even know it was possible for one human to hurt another human so much. It was like being hit by a rod of steel and I felt something break. I heard the girl cry out. I was already

falling but as I went down he hit me again with the other fist so that my head snapped back and my body collapsed in two directions at once. I remember a bolt of white light that seemed to be my own death. I was unconscious before I reached the floor.

РУССКАЯ РУЛЕТКА

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

I woke up in total darkness, lying in a cramped space with my legs hunched up, a gag in my mouth and my hands tied. My first thought was that I was locked inside a box, that I had been buried alive – and for the next sixty seconds I was screaming without making any sound, my heart racing, my muscles straining against the ropes around my wrists, barely able to catch breath. Somehow I got myself under control. It wasn't a box. I was in the boot of a car. We had been standing stationary a moment ago but now I heard the throb of the engine and felt us move off. That still wasn't good. I was being allowed to live – but for how long?

I was in a bad way. My head was pounding – and by that I mean all of it, inside and out. The whole side of my face was swollen. It hurt me to move my mouth and I couldn't close one of my eyes. The man's fist had broken my cheekbone. I had no idea what I looked like but what did that matter? I did not expect to live.

I presumed the man was Vladimir Sharkovsky. Fagin had warned me that he was dangerous but that was only half the story. I had seen enough of him in the flat to know that he was a psychopath. No ordinary person had eyes like that. He had been utterly cold when I had attacked him but when his temper flared up it had been like a demon leaping out of the craters of hell. *He hadn't called the police.* That was the worst of it. He was taking me somewhere and when he got there he could do whatever he wanted to me. I dreaded to think what that might be. Was he planning to torture me as a punishment for what I had done? I had heard that many hundreds of children went missing from the streets of Moscow every year. It might well be my fate to become one of them.

I cannot say how long the journey took. I couldn't see my watch with my hands tied behind me and after a while, I dozed off. I didn't

sleep exactly. I simply drifted out of consciousness. It would have been nice to have dreamt of my parents and of my life in Estrov, to have spent my last hours on this planet reliving happier times, but I was in too much pain. Every few minutes, my eyes would blink open and I would once again find myself struggling for breath in that almost airtight compartment, desperately wanting to straighten up, to go to the toilet, to be anywhere but there. The car just rumbled on.

Eventually, we arrived. I felt us slowing down. Then we stopped and I heard a man's voice, a command being given, followed by what sounded like the click of a metal gate. When we set off again, there was a different surface – gravel – beneath the tyres. The car stopped and the engine was turned off. The driver's door opened and shut and I heard footsteps on the gravel. I tensed myself, waiting for the car boot to be released, but it didn't happen. The footsteps disappeared into the distance and when, a long time later, they hadn't come back, I began to think that I was going to be left here all night, like a piece of baggage nobody needed.

And so it was. I was left in the dark, in silence, with no idea how long it was going to last or what would happen when I was released. It was being done on purpose, of course, to break my spirit, to make me suffer. I was the victim of my own worst imaginings. I had nothing to do except to count every single painful minute. Unable to move, to stretch myself, my whole body was in torment. My only option was to try to sleep, fighting back all the dread that came from being tied up and left in this small space. It was a long, hideous night. By the time the boot was opened, I was no longer afraid of death. I think I would have welcomed it. A short tunnel of horrors followed by release. It would be worth the journey.

There was a man leaning over me; not the one from the Moscow flat. He was quite simply massive – with oversized shoulders and a thick neck – and dressed in a cheap grey suit, a white shirt and a black tie. His hair was blond and thickly oiled so that it stood up in spikes. He was wearing dark glasses and there was a radio transmitter behind his ear that had a wire curling down to a throat mike. His skin was utterly white and it occurred to me that he might have been in a

prison or some other institution all his life. He didn't look as if he had ever spent any time in the sun.

He reached down and with a single movement dragged me out of the boot, then stood me up so that I was balanced against the back of the car. I would have fallen otherwise. There was no strength in my legs. He looked at me with hardly any expression apart from disgust and I couldn't blame him for that. I stank. My clothes were crumpled. My face was caked with blood. He reached into his jacket pocket and I winced as he produced a knife. I was quite ready for him to plunge it into my chest but he just leant over me and cut the cords of my wrists. My hands fell free. They looked horrible. The flesh of my wrists was blue, covered in welts. I couldn't move my fingers but I felt the pins and needles as the blood supply was restored.

"You are to come with us," he said. He had a deep, gravelly voice. He spoke without emotion, as if he didn't actually enjoy speaking.

Us? I glanced round and saw a second man standing at the side of the car. For a moment, I thought my brain was playing tricks on me after my long captivity. This second man was identical to the first – the same height, the same looks, the same clothes. They were twins ... just like the two girls I had once known in Estrov. But it was almost as if these two had trained themselves to be indistinguishable. They had the same haircut, the same sunglasses. They even moved at exactly the same time, like mirror images.

The first twin hadn't bothered to find out my name. He didn't want to know anything about me.

"Where are we?" I asked. The words came out clumsily because of the damage to my face.

"No questions. Do as you are told."

He gestured. I began to walk and for the first time I was able to take in my surroundings. I was in what looked like a large and very beautiful park with pathways, neatly cut grass and trees. The park was surrounded by a brick wall, several metres high with razor wire around the top, and I could make out the tips of more trees on the other side. The car that I had been in was a black Lexus. It had been parked quite close to an arched gateway with a barrier that rose and

fell, the only way out, I suspected. A guardhouse stood next to it. This was a wooden construction with a large glass window and I could see a man in uniform, watching us as we walked together. My first thought was that I had been brought to some sort of prison. There were arc lamps and CCTV cameras set at intervals along the wall.

We were heading towards a cluster of eight wooden houses that had been tucked out of sight behind some fir trees, about fifty metres from the gates. They were new-looking, completely featureless and almost identical. In the West, they would be called portakabins, although they were a little larger and they'd been built two high with external staircases connecting them. I noticed that there were no bars on any of the windows. These weren't cells. I guessed they provided accommodation for the people who worked here. A larger, brick building stood nearby perhaps with a dining room attached.

I glanced behind me. And although I hadn't been given permission, I came to a stumbling halt. Where the hell was I? I had never seen anything like this.

A gravel drive with lamps and flower beds on each side led from the entrance through the parkland and up to a monumental white house. Not a house. A palace ... and not one that had come out of any fairy tale. It was a modern building, newly built, pure white, with two wings stretching out from a central block which alone must have contained about fifty rooms. There were terraces with white balustrades, white columns with triple-height doorways opening behind, walkways and balconies, and above it all a white dome like that of a planetarium or perhaps a cathedral. Half a dozen satellite dishes had been mounted on the roof along with television aerials and a radio tower. A man stood there, watching me through binoculars. He was wearing the same uniform as the man at the gate – but with a difference. Even at this distance I could see that he had a machine gun strapped to his shoulder.

Closer to the house, the gardens became more ornamental with statues on plinths, marble benches, beautifully tended walkways and arbours, bushes cut into fantastic shapes, more flower beds laid out in intricate patterns. An army of gardeners would have to work the

whole year round to keep it all looking like this and even as I stood there I saw some of them pushing wheelbarrows or on their knees weeding. The drive broke into two as it reached the front door, sweeping round a white marble fountain that had gods and mermaids all tangled together and water splashing down. I saw two Rolls Royces, a Bentley and a Ferrari parked outside. But the owner didn't just have cars. His private helicopter was parked on a concrete square, discreetly located next to a summer house. It was under canvas with the blades tied down.

“Why are you waiting?” one of the twins demanded.

“Who lives here?” I asked.

His answer was a jab in the side of my stomach. It had been aimed around my kidney and it hurt. “I told you. No questions.”

I was very quickly learning the rules of this place. I was worth nothing. Anyone could do anything to me. I swallowed a grunt of pain and continued to the smallest cabin, right on the edge of the complex. The door was open and I looked into a room with a narrow metal bed, a table and a chair. There was no carpet, no curtains, nothing in the way of decoration. A second door led into a toilet and shower.

“You have five minutes,” the man said. “Throw those clothes away. You will not need them. Wash yourself and make yourself presentable. Do not leave this room. If you do, the guards will shoot you down.”

He left me on my own. I stripped off my clothes and went into the bathroom. I used the toilet, then I had a shower. I knew I was in danger. It was quite likely that I would soon be dead. But that shower was still a wonderful experience. The water was hot and there was enough pressure to soak me completely. There was even a bar of soap. It had been three weeks since I had last washed – that had been in the *banya*, the bathhouse in Moscow – and black dirt seemed to ooze out of my body, disappearing down the plughole. Thinking of the bathhouse reminded me of Dima. What would he be doing now? Had he seen me being bundled into the car by Sharkovsky and, if so, might he come looking for me? At least that was something to give

me hope.

My face still hurt though, and when I examined myself in the mirror, it was as bad as I had feared. I barely recognized myself. One eye was half closed. There was a huge bruise all around it. My cheek looked like a rotting fruit with a gash where the man's fist had caught me. I was lucky I still had all my teeth. Looking at the damage, I was reminded of what lay ahead. I hadn't been brought here for my own comfort. I was being prepared for something. My punishment was still to come.

I went back into the bedroom. My own clothes had been taken away while I was washing and, with a jolt, I realized that the last of my mother's jewellery had gone with them. Her ring had been in my back pocket. I knew at once that there would be no point in asking for it back and I had to hold down a great wave of sadness, the sense that I had nothing left. She had worn that ring and touching it, I had felt I was touching her. Now that it had been taken from me, it was as if I had finally been separated from the boy I had once been.

I had been supplied with a black tracksuit, black socks and black slip-on shoes. I dried myself, using a towel that had been hanging in the bathroom, and got dressed. The clothes fitted me very well.

"Are you ready?" The twins were standing outside, calling to me. I left the cabin and joined them. They glanced at me, both of them still showing a complete lack of interest.

"Come with us," one of them said. They appeared to have a fairly limited vocabulary too.

We walked up the drive all the way to the big house. As we went, we passed another security guard, this one with an Alsatian dog on a leash. A television camera mounted above the front door watched our approach. But we didn't go in that way. The twins took me in through a side door next to the dustbin area and along a corridor. Here the walls were plain and the floor black and white tiles. The servants' entrance. We passed a laundry room, a boot room and a pantry next to a kitchen. I glimpsed a woman in a black dress and a white apron, polishing silver. She didn't notice me or, if she did, she pretended not to. My feet, in the soft shoes, made no sound as we continued

through. I was feeling queasy and I knew why. I was afraid.

We passed through a hallway; this was the main entrance to the house. A magnificent staircase swept down to the front door with a marble pillar on each side. The hallway itself was huge. You could have parked a dozen cars there. A bowl of flowers stood on a table – it must have emptied a flower shop. The central light was a chandelier, hundreds of crystals twinkling brilliantly like a firework display. It made the lights I had seen in the Moscow Metro look cheap and gaudy. There were more doors on every side. It was all too much for me to take in. If a spaceship had grabbed me and deposited me on the moon, I would have felt as much at home.

“In here...”

One of the twins knocked on an oak door and, without waiting for a reply, opened it. I went in.

The man from the Moscow apartment was sitting behind an oversized antique desk. There were bookshelves behind him and on one side a globe that looked so old that quite a few of the countries were probably missing ... yet to be discovered. He was framed by two windows with red velvet curtains and a view out to the fountain and the drive. The room was very warm. One wall contained a stone fireplace – two crouching imps or demons supporting the mantelpiece on their shoulders – and a Dalmatian, lay stretched out in front of it. The walls were covered with paintings. The largest was a portrait of the man I was facing and I have to say that the painted version was the more welcoming of the two. He had not looked up from his work. He was reading a document, making notes in the margins with a black fountain pen.

There was a gun on the desk in front of him.

As I stood there, waiting to be told what to do, I found myself staring at it. It was a revolver, a very old-fashioned model with a stainless steel barrel, five inches long, and a black, enamel grip. It wasn't like an automatic or a self-loading pistol where you feed the bullets into a clip. This one had a cylinder and six chambers. A single bullet lay beside it.

“Sit down,” he said, pointing to an empty chair in front of him.

I stepped forward, although it felt more as if I was floating, and sat down. The door clicked shut behind me. Without being instructed, the twins had left.

I waited for the master of the house to speak. He was wearing a suit now and somehow I knew that it was expensive and that it hadn't been made in Russia. The material was too luxurious and it fitted too well. He had a pale blue shirt and a brown tie. Now that he wasn't wearing his coat, I could see that he was very muscular. He must have spent hundreds of hours in the gym. He had also removed the hat and I saw that he was completely bald. He had not lost his hair. He had shaved it off, leaving a dark shadow that made him more death-like than ever. I waited in dread for his heavy, ugly eyes to settle on me. My face was hurting badly and I wanted to go to the toilet again. But I didn't dare say anything. I didn't move.

At length he stopped and lay the pen down. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Yasha Gregorovich."

"Yassen?" He had misheard me. The side of my face was so swollen that I had mispronounced my own name. It would be very unusual to be called Yassen. It is Russian for ash tree. But I did not correct him. I had decided it would be better not to speak unless I had to. "How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm fourteen."

"Where are you from?"

I remembered my mother's warning. "A town called Kirsk," I said. "It's a long way away. You won't have heard of it."

The man thought for a moment, then he got up, walked round the desk and stood next to me. He took his time, considering the situation, then suddenly and without warning slapped me across the face. The blow wasn't a particularly hard one, certainly not as hard as the night before, but nor did it need to be. My cheekbone was already broken and the fresh pain almost knocked me off the chair. Black spots appeared in front of my eyes. I thought I was going to be sick.

By the time I had recovered, the man was back in his chair. "Never make assumptions," he said. "Never assume anything about me. And

when you speak to me, call me 'sir'. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded. "Do you have parents?"

"No, sir. They're both dead."

"And last night, when you broke into my flat, were you alone?"

I had already decided that I wasn't going to tell him about Dima, Roman and Grigory. If I told him their names, I had no doubt he would send his men round to Tverskaya to kill them. I still thought he was going to kill me. "Yes, sir," I replied. "I was on my own."

"How did you come to choose that flat – as opposed to any other?"

"I was walking past. I saw that the window was open and the lights were out. I didn't even think about it. I just went in."

The answer seemed to satisfy him. He took out a gold cigarette case. I noticed the initials V.S. on the cover. He removed a cigarette and lit it, then lay the case on the desk, close to the gun. "Vladimir Sharkovsky," he said. "That is my name."

I didn't tell him that I knew. I simply sat there and watched as he smoked in silence. I would have liked a cigarette but I needed the toilet more. My insides were churning.

"You must be wondering why you are still alive," he continued. "In fact, you should not be. Last night, as I drove over the bridge, I thought of dropping you in the Moscow River. I would have quite enjoyed watching you drown. When I drove you here, my intention was to give you to Josef and Karl to be punished and then killed. Even now, I am undecided if you will live or if you will die." His eyes rested briefly on the revolver. "The fact that you are sitting in this room, talking to me, is down to one reason only. It is a question of timing. Perhaps you have been lucky. A week ago it would have been different. But right now..."

He trailed off, then took another drag on the cigarette, the blue smoke curling into the air. A log snapped in the fireplace and the dog stirred briefly, then went back to sleep. So far, Vladimir Sharkovsky had shown no emotion whatsoever. His voice was flat, entirely disinterested. If machines had ever learned to speak, they would speak like him.

“I am a careful man,” he went on. “One of the reasons why I have prospered is that I have always used everything that has been given to me. I never miss an opportunity. It may be an investment in a company, the chance to buy my way into a bank, the weakness of a government official who is open to bribery. Or it may be the chance appearance of a worthless thief and guttersnipe like yourself. But if it can be used, then I will use it. That is how I live.

“There is something you need to understand about me. I am extremely successful. Right now, Russia is changing. The old ways are being left behind. For those of us with the vision to see what is possible, the rewards are limitless. You have nothing. You steal because you are hungry and all you think about is your next pathetic meal. I have the world and everything in it. And now, Yassen Gregorovich, I have you.

“A large number of people work for me in this house. Because of the nature of my work and who I am, I have to be careful. Josef and Karl, the two men who brought you here, are my personal bodyguards. They are standing outside and I should perhaps warn you that there is a communication button underneath this desk. If you were to try anything, if you were to threaten me again, they would be in here in an instant. Be glad they were not with me in Moscow. That was the private apartment of a friend of mine. The moment you picked up that knife, your own life would have been over.

“I will not kill you – yet – because I think I can use you. As it happens, a position has arisen here, a vacancy which it would not normally be easy to fill. You are, as I said, very fortunate with the timing. I have no doubt that you are stupid and uneducated. But even so, you might be acceptable.”

He paused and it took me a few seconds to realize that he was waiting for me to reply. I couldn't believe what he had just told me. He wasn't going to kill me. He was offering me a job!

“I'd be very happy to work for you, sir,” I said.

His eyes settled on me, full of contempt. “Happy?” He repeated the word with a sneer. “You say stupid things without thinking. It is not my intention to make you happy. Quite the opposite. You broke into

my apartment. You attempted to hurt me and in doing so you ruined a perfectly good overcoat, a jacket and a shirt. You even cut my flesh. For this, you must pay. You must be punished. If you decide to accept my proposal, you will spend every hour of the rest of your life wishing that the two of us had never met. I am not offering to pay you. I will own you. I will use you. From this moment on, I will expect your total obedience. You will do whatever I tell you. You will not hesitate.” He gestured at the fireplace. “You see the dog? That is what you are now. That’s all you mean to me.”

He stubbed out the cigarette. I could see that he was bored with the interview, that he wanted it to be over.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked. “What sort of work?”

I had no choice. I had to survive. Let him employ me in whatever capacity and somehow I would find a way out of this place. In the back of a car, over the wall ... I would escape.

“You will clean. You will carry messages. You will sweep floors. You will help in the garden. But that’s just part of it. The main reason that I need you is something quite different.” He paused. “You will be my food taster.”

“Your...?” I almost laughed out loud and if I had, I am sure he would have shot me there and then. But it was ridiculous. At school, we had been taught about the Roman emperors – Julius Caesar and the others – who had employed slaves to taste everything they ate. But this was Russia in the twentieth century. He couldn’t possibly mean what he had just said.

“It is unfortunately the case that I have many enemies,” Sharkovsky explained. He was completely serious. “Some of them fear me. Some are jealous of me. All of them would benefit if I was no longer here. In the last year, there have been three attempts on my life. That is how things are now. Several of my associates have been less fortunate – which is to say, they have been less careful than me. And they have died.

“Apart from my wife and my children, I can trust no one and even my immediate family might one day be bribed to do me harm. I employ a great many people to protect me and I have to employ more

people to watch over them. I trust none of them.” His dark eyes bore into me. “Can I trust you?”

I was trying to make sense of all this. Was that really to be my fate? Sitting at his dining table, digging my fork into his *blinis* and caviar?

“I’ll do whatever you want,” I said.

“Will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anything?”

“Yes...” This time I was uneasy.

It was what he had been waiting for. It was the very worst thing I could have said.

“We will see.” He reached out and took the gun. He jerked open the cylinder and showed me that it was empty. Then he picked up the bullet – a little cylinder of gleaming silver – and held it between his finger and thumb like a scientist giving a demonstration. I watched silently. I didn’t know what was about to happen but I could feel my heart pounding. He slid the bullet into one of the chambers and snapped the cylinder shut. Then he spun it several times so that the metal became a blur and it was impossible for either of us to tell where the bullet had lodged.

“You say you will do anything for me,” he said. “So do this. The gun has six chambers. As you have seen, one of them now contains a live bullet. You do not know where the bullet is. Nor do I.” He placed the gun back on the desk, right in front of me. “Put the gun into your mouth and pull the trigger.”

I stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple enough!” he said. “Point the gun at the back of your mouth and shoot.”

“But why...?”

“Because you said to me five seconds ago that you would do anything I wanted and now I am asking you to prove it. I need to know that I can rely on you. Either you will pull the trigger or you will not. But let us consider the options, Yassen Gregorovich. If you will not do what I ask, then you have lied to me and I cannot use you after all. In that case, I can assure you that your death is certain. If

you do as I have asked, then there are two possibilities that lie ahead of you. It is quite possible that you will kill yourself, that in a few minutes' time, my cleaners will be wiping your brains off my carpet. That will be annoying. But there is also a very good chance that you will live and from that moment on you will serve me. It is your decision and you must make it now. I don't have all day."

He was torturing me after all. He was asking me to play this horrific game to prove beyond any doubt that he had complete power over me. I would never argue with him. I would never refuse an order. If I did this, I would be accepting that my own life no longer belonged to me. That in every respect I was his.

What could I do? What choice did I have?

I picked up the gun. It was much heavier than I had expected but at the same time, I had no strength at all. Nothing below my shoulder seemed to be working properly – not my wrist, not my hand, not my fingers. I could feel my pulse racing and I had to struggle even to breathe. What this man was demanding was horrific ... beyond imagination. Six chambers. One containing a bullet. A one in six chance. When I pulled the trigger, nothing might happen. Or I might send a piece of metal travelling at two hundred miles per hour into my own head. If I didn't do it, he would kill me. That was what it came down to. I felt hot tears brimming over my cheeks. It seemed impossible that my life could have come to this.

"Don't cry like a baby," Sharkovsky said. "Get on with it."

My arm and wrist were aching. I could feel the blood pumping through my veins. Almost involuntarily, my finger had curled around the trigger. The grip was pressed against the palm of my hand. For a crazy moment, I thought of firing at Sharkovsky, of emptying the chamber in his direction. But what good would that do me? He probably had a second gun concealed somewhere and if I didn't find the bullet at the first attempt he would have plenty of time to shoot me where I sat.

"Please, sir..." I whispered.

"I am not interested in your tears or your pleading," he snapped. "I am interested only in your obedience."

“But...”

“Do it now!”

I touched the muzzle of the gun against the side of my head.

“In your mouth!”

I will never forget his insistence, that one obscene detail. I pushed the barrel of the gun between my teeth, feeling the muzzle grazing the roof of my mouth. I could taste the metal, cold and bitter. I was aware of the black hole, the muzzle, pointing at my throat with, perhaps, a bullet resting behind it, waiting to begin its short journey. Sharkovsky was gloating. I don't think he cared one way or the other what the outcome would be. I couldn't breathe. The contents of my stomach were rising up. I pressed with my finger but I couldn't make it work. In my mind I already heard the explosion. I felt the scorching heat and saw the darkness falling like a blade as my life was snatched away.

“Do it!” he snarled.

One chance in six.

I squeezed the trigger.

The hammer drew back. How far would it travel before it fell? I was certain that these were the last seconds of my life. And yet everything was happening horribly slowly. They seemed to stretch on for ever.

I felt the mechanism release itself in my hand. The hammer fell with a heavy, thunderous click.

Nothing.

There had been no explosion. The chamber was empty.

Relief rushed through me but it did not feel good. It was as if I was being emptied, as if my entire life and all the good things I had ever experienced were being taken from me. From this moment on, I belonged to Sharkovsky. That was what he had demonstrated. I dropped the gun. It fell heavily against the surface of the desk and lay there between us. The muzzle was wet with my saliva.

“You can leave now,” he said.

He must have pressed the communication button under his desk because although I hadn't heard them, the men who had brought me here had returned. Perhaps the twins had been present and had seen

what had just happened. I didn't know.

I stood up. My whole body felt foreign to me. I might not have killed myself but even so, something inside me had died.

"Yassen Gregorovich is working for me now," Sharvovsky continued. "Take him downstairs and show him."

The two men led me out of the study and back into the corridor we had come through together. But this time we took a staircase down into a basement area. There was an oversized fridge door that led into a cold storage room and I watched as one twin opened it and the other went inside. He wheeled out a trolley. There was a dead body on it, covered by a sheet. He lifted it up and I saw a naked man. He couldn't have been more than ten years older than me when he died. It had happened very recently. His face was distorted with pain. His hands seemed to be scrabbling at his throat.

I understood without being told. The old food taster.

A position has arisen here. That was what Vladimir Sharkovsky had said to me. Now I knew why.

СЕРЕБРЯНЫЙ БОР

SILVER FOREST

I made my first escape attempt that same day.

I knew I couldn't stay there. I wasn't going to play any more of Sharkovsky's sadistic games and I certainly wasn't going to swallow his food ... not when there was a real chance of my ending up on a metal slab. I had been left alone for the rest of the day. Perhaps they thought I needed time to recover from my ordeal and they were certainly right. The moment I got back to my room, I was sick. After that, I slept for about three hours. One of the twins visited me during the afternoon. He brought more clothes with him: overalls, boots, an apron, a suit. Each piece of clothing related to a different task I would be expected to perform. I left them on the floor. I wasn't going to be part of this. I was out.

As soon as night had come, I left my room and set out to explore the grounds, now empty of gardeners although there were still guards patrolling close to the wall. It was clear to me that the wall completely surrounded the complex and there was no possibility of my climbing it. It was too high, and anyway, the razor wire would cut me to shreds. The simple truth was that the archway was the only way in and out – but at least that meant I could focus my attention on that one avenue. And looking at it, I wasn't sure that it was as secure as it seemed. Three uniformed guards sat inside the wooden cabin with a glass window that allowed them to look out over the driveway. They had television monitors too. There was a red and white pole, which they had to raise, and they searched every vehicle that came in, one of them looking underneath with a flat mirror on wheels while another checked the driver's ID. But when there were no cars, they did nothing. One of them read a newspaper. The others simply sat back looking bored. I could just slip out. It wouldn't be difficult at all.

That was my plan. It was about seven o'clock and I assumed

everyone was eating. I'd had no food all day but I was in no mood to eat. Still wearing the black tracksuit – the colour would help to conceal me in the darkness – I slipped outside. When I was sure there was nobody around, I sprinted to the edge of the cabin and then crept round, crouching underneath the window and keeping close to the wall. The road back to Moscow lay in front of me. I couldn't believe it was this easy.

It wasn't. I only found out about the infrared sensors when I passed through one of them, immediately setting off a deafening alarm. At once the whole area exploded into brilliant light as arc lamps sliced into me and I found myself trapped between the beams. There was no point in running – I would have been shot before I had taken ten steps – and I could only stand there looking foolish as the guards seized hold of me and dragged me back.

Punishment was immediate and hideous. I was given to the twins, who simply beat me up as if I were a punchbag in a gym. It wasn't just the pain that left its mark on me. It was their complete indifference. I know they were being paid by Sharkovsky. They were following his orders. But what sort of man can do this to a child and live with himself the next day? They were careful not to break any more bones, but by the time they dragged me back to my room, I was barely conscious. They threw me onto my bed and left me. I had passed out before they closed the door.

I made my second escape attempt as soon as I was able to move again, the next day. It was certainly foolish but it seemed to me that it was the last thing they would expect and so they might briefly lower their guard. They thought I was broken, exhausted. Both of these things were true but I was also determined. This time, a delivery truck provided the opportunity. I'd eaten breakfast in my room – one of the twins had brought it on a tray – but after I'd finished I was sent up to the house to help unload about fifty crates of wine and champagne that Sharkovsky had ordered. It didn't matter that I could feel my shirt sticking to my open wounds and that every movement caused me pain. While the driver waited, I carried the crates in through the back door and down the steps that led to the

cold storage room. There was a wine cellar next to it, a cavernous space that housed hundreds of bottles, facing each other in purpose-built racks. It took me about two hours to carry them all down and when I'd finished I noticed that there were a lot of empty boxes in the back of the van. It seemed easy enough to hide myself behind a pile of them. Surely they wouldn't bother searching the van on the way out?

The driver closed the door. Crouching behind the boxes, I heard him start the engine. We drove back down the drive and slowed down. I waited for the moment of truth, the acceleration that meant we had passed through the barrier and were outside the compound. It never came. The door was thrown open again and a voice called me.

“Get out!”

Again, it was one of the twins. I don't know how he'd been so certain that I was there. Maybe I'd been caught by one of the CCTV cameras. Maybe he had been expecting it all along. I felt a weakness in my stomach as I stood up and showed myself. I wasn't sure I could take another beating. But even as I climbed down, I wouldn't let him see I was scared. I wasn't going to give in.

“Come with me,” he instructed.

His face gave nothing away. I followed him back to the house but this time he took me round the back. There was a conservatory on the other side, although actually it was more like a pavilion, constructed mainly out of glass with white wooden panels, at least fifty metres long. It had a series of folding doors so that in the full heat of the summer the whole thing could be opened out, but this was late October and they were all closed. The twins opened a single door and led me inside. I found myself in front of an enormous blue-tiled swimming pool, almost Olympic-sized. The water was heated. I could see the steam rising over the surface. Sunloungers had been arranged around the edge and there was a well-stocked bar with a mirrored counter and leather stools.

Sharkovsky was doing lengths. We stood there, watching, while he went from one end to the other and back again, performing a steady, rhythmic butterfly stroke. I counted eighteen lengths and he never

stopped once. Nor did he look my way. This was how he liked to keep himself fit, and as he continued I couldn't help but notice the extraordinarily well-developed muscles in his back and shoulders. I also saw his tattoos. There was a Jewish Star of David in the centre of his back – but it wasn't a religious symbol. On the contrary, it was on fire with the words DEATH TO ZIONISM engraved below. These were the flames that I had seen reaching up to his neck in his Moscow apartment. When he finally finished swimming and climbed out, I saw a huge eagle with outstretched wings, perched on a Nazi swastika tattooed across his chest. He had a slight paunch, but even this was solid rather than flabby. There was a plaster underneath one of his nipples and I realized that this was where I must have cut him with the knife. He was wearing tiny swimming trunks. His whole appearance was somehow very grotesque.

At last he noticed me. He picked up a towel and walked over. I was trembling. I couldn't stop myself. I was expecting the worst.

“Yassen Gregorovich,” he said. “I understand that you tried to leave this place last night. You were punished for this but it didn't prevent you from making a second attempt today. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir.” There was no point in denying it.

“It is understandable. It shows spirit. At the same time, it goes against the contract that you and I made between us in my study yesterday. You agreed to work for me. You agreed you were mine. Have you forgotten so soon?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well. Then hear this. You cannot escape from here. It is not possible. Should you try again, there will be no further discussion, no punishment. I will simply have you killed. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to the twins. “Josef, take Yassen away. Give him another beating – this time use a cane – and then lock him up on his own without food. Let me know when he has recovered enough to start work. That's all.”

But we didn't leave. The twin wouldn't let me. And Sharkovsky was waiting for me to say something.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

Sharkovsky smiled. “That’s alright, Yassen. It’s my pleasure.”

I was to spend the next three years with Vladimir Sharkovsky.

I could not risk another escape attempt – not unless I was prepared to commit suicide. It took me a week to recover from the beating I received that day. I will not say that it broke my spirit. But by the end of it I knew that when I had picked up that gun and placed it in my mouth, I had signed a deal with the devil. I was not just his servant. I was his possession. You might even say I was his slave.

The place where I found myself, the huge white house, was his *dacha* – his second home outside Moscow. It was in Serebryany Bor – Silver Forest – not that many miles from the centre. This was an area well suited to wealthy families. The air was cleaner in the forest. It was quieter and more private. There were lakes and wooded walkways outside the complex where you could exercise the dogs or go hunting and fishing ... not that these activities were available to me because, of course, I was never once allowed outside. I was restricted to the same few faces, the same menial tasks. My life was to have no rewards and no prospect of advancement or release. It was a terrible thing to do to anyone – even worse when you consider that I was so young.

And yet slowly, inevitably perhaps, I accepted my destiny. The injury to my face healed and fortunately it left no mark. I began to get used to my new life.

I worked all the time at the *dacha* ... fifteen hours a day, seven days a week. I never had a holiday and, as Sharkovsky had promised, I didn’t receive one kopeck. The fact that I was being allowed to live was payment enough. Christmas, Easter, Victory Day, Spring and Labour Day, my birthdays – all these simply disappeared into each other.

Sharkovsky had told me I would be his food taster but he had also made it clear to me that this was only a part of my work. He was true to his word. I chopped and carried firewood. I cleaned bathrooms and toilets. I helped in the laundry and the kitchen. I washed dishes. I

painted walls. I looked after the dog, picking up after it when it fouled. I lifted suitcases. I unblocked drains. I washed cars. I polished shoes. But I never complained. I understood that there was no point in complaining. The work never stopped.

Sharkovsky lived in the big house with his wife, Maya, and his two children, Ivan and Svetlana. Maya had very little to do with me. She spent most of her time reading magazines and paperbacks – she liked romances – or shopping in Moscow. She had once been a model and she was still attractive, but life with Sharkovsky was beginning to take its toll and I would sometimes catch her looking anxiously in the mirror, tracking a finger along a wrinkle or a wisp of grey hair. I wondered if she knew about the flat in Gorky Park and the actress who lived there. In a way, she was as much a prisoner as I was and maybe that was why she avoided me. I reminded her of herself.

The family were seldom together. Sharkovsky had business interests all over the world. As well as the helicopter, he kept a private jet at Moscow airport. It was on permanent standby, ready to take him to London, New York, Hong Kong or wherever. I once glimpsed him on television, standing next to the President of the United States. He took his holidays in the Bahamas or the South of France, where he kept a hundred and fifty metre yacht with twenty-one guest cabins, two swimming pools and its own submarine. His son, Ivan, was at Harrow School, in London. If there was one thing that all wealthy Russians wanted, it was an English public school education for their children. Svetlana was only seven when I arrived but she was kept busy too. There were always private tutors coming to the house to teach dance, piano, horse riding, tennis (they had their own tennis court), foreign languages, poetry... When they were small, each child had had two nannies; one for the day, one for the night. Now they had two full-time housekeepers ... and me.

Sixteen members of staff lived full-time on the estate. They all slept in wooden cabins, similar to mine, apart from Josef and Karl, who lived in the big house. There were the two housekeepers – bossy women who were always in a hurry, permanently scowling. One of them was called Nina and she had it in for me from the start. She

used to carry a wooden spoon in her apron and whenever she got the chance she would clout me over the head with it. She didn't seem to have noticed that we were both servants, on the same level, but I didn't dare complain. I have a feeling that she hated working for Sharkovsky as much as I did. The only trouble was, she'd decided to take it out on me.

Then there was Pavel, about fifty years old, short, twitchy, always dressed in whites. He was very important to me because he was the chef and it was his cooking that I would be tasting. I'll say this for him, he was good at his job. All the food he prepared was delicious and I was given things I hadn't even known existed. Until I came to the *dacha*, I had never eaten salmon, pheasant, veal, asparagus, French cheese ... or even such a thing as a chocolate éclair. Pavel only used the very best and the freshest ingredients, which were flown in from all over the world. I remember a cake he made for Maya's birthday. It was shaped like a Russian cathedral, complete with gold-leaf icing on the domes. Heaven knows how much he was given to spend.

I never got to know Pavel very well, even though he slept in the cabin next to me. He was hard of hearing so he didn't talk much. He was unmarried. He had no children. All he cared about was his work.

The staff included a personal trainer and two chauffeurs. Sharkovsky had a huge fleet of cars and he was always buying more. Six armed guards patrolled the grounds and took turns manning the gatehouse. There was a general maintenance man, who was always smoking, always coughing. He looked after the tennis court and the heated swimming pool in the conservatory. I will not waste time describing these people ... or the gardeners, who turned up every morning and worked ten hours a day. They are not really part of my story. They were simply there.

But I must mention the helicopter pilot, a very quiet man in his forties, with silver hair cut short in a military style. His name was Arkady Zelin and he had once flown with the VVS – the Soviet Air Force. He neither drank nor smoked. Sharkovsky would never have put his life in the hands of a man who was not utterly dependable. He

was always on standby in case his master needed to get somewhere in a hurry, so he might spend weeks at the *dacha* between flights, and once the helicopter had been tied down there was little for him to do. Just like Maya, he read books. He also kept himself fit, doing press-ups and running around the grounds. Sharkovsky had a gymnasium as well as the pool but Zelin wasn't allowed to use either of them.

Zelin was one of the few people who bothered to introduce himself to me and I was quick to let him know about my old love of helicopters. He piloted a two-bladed Bell 206 JetRanger with seating for four passengers – Sharkovsky had ordered it from Canada – and although I wasn't allowed near it, I often found myself gazing at it across the lawn. Escape was too dangerous to consider, but even so, in my wilder moments, it sometimes occurred to me that the helicopter might be my only way out. I couldn't hide in it. I'd have been spotted at once unless I crawled into the luggage compartment and that was always kept locked. But maybe, one day, I would be able to persuade Zelin to take me with him – if he was flying alone. It was a foolish thought but I had to keep some sort of hope alive in my head or I'd go mad. And so I stayed close to him. The two of us would play *Durak* together, the same game that I had played with Dima, Roman and Grigory. Sometimes I wondered what had happened to them. But as time went on, I thought about them less and less.

One other member of the staff was important to me. His name was Nigel Brown and he was English, a thin, elderly man with straggly ginger hair and a pinched face. He had once been the headmaster of a prep school in Norfolk and still dressed as if he worked there, with corduroy trousers and, every day, the same tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. Zelin told me there had been some sort of scandal at the school and he had been forced to take early retirement. It was certainly true that Mr Brown never talked about his time there. Sharkovsky had hired him as a private tutor, to help Ivan and Svetlana pass their exams. Other tutors came and went but he lived at the *dacha* permanently.

All the staff met every evening. Just as I had thought, the brick building which I had seen beside the cabins was a recreation room

with a kitchen and dining area, where we ate our meals. There were a few battered sofas and chairs, a snooker table, a television, a coffee machine and a public telephone – although all calls were monitored and I wasn't allowed to use it at all. After dinner, the guards who weren't on duty, the chauffeurs and sometimes the chef would sit and smoke. Mr Brown had nothing to say to any of them but perhaps because I was so young, he took an interest in me and decided for no good reason to teach me English. It soon became a personal project and he took delight in my progress. It turned out that I had a natural aptitude for languages and after a while he began to teach me French and German too. Most of the languages I speak today, I owe to him.

While he taught me, he drank. Maybe this was what had led to his downfall in Norfolk, but at the start of each lesson he would open a bottle of vodka and by the end of it I could hardly work out what he was saying, no matter what the language. By midnight he was usually unconscious and there were many occasions when I had to carry him back to his room. There was, however, one aspect of his drinking habit that was useful to me. He was not a cautious man and under the influence of alcohol he didn't care what he said.

It was Nigel Brown who told me what little I knew about Sharkovsky.

“How did he make all his money?” I once asked. It was a warm evening about six months after I had arrived. There was no breeze and the mosquitoes were whining beneath the electric lights.

“Ah, well, that's all politics,” he replied. We had been talking in English but now he slipped back into Russian, which he spoke fluently. “The end of Communism in your country created a sort of vacuum. A few men stepped in and he was one of them. They've sucked all the money out of your country, every last ruble. Some of them have made billions! Mr Sharkovsky invested in companies. Scrap metal, chemicals, cars... He bought and he sold and the money flowed in.”

“But why does he need so much protection?”

“Because he's an evil bastard.” He smiled as if he was surprised by what he had just said but decided to continue anyway. “Mr

Sharkovsky is connected with the police. He's connected with the politicians. He's connected with the mafia. He's a very dangerous man. God knows how many people he's killed to get to where he is. But the trouble is, you can't go on like that without making enemies. He really is a *shark*." He repeated the last word in English. "Do you know the word 'shark', Yassen? It's a big fish. A dangerous fish. It will gobble you up. Now, let's get back to these irregular verbs, past tense. *I buy, you bought. I see, you saw. I speak, you spoke...*"

Sharkovsky must have had plenty of enemies. We lived our life under siege at the *dacha*, and as I had discovered, painfully, there was no way in or out. There were X-ray machines and metal detectors at the main gates – just like at a modern airport – and nobody was allowed in or out without being searched. The gardeners arrived empty-handed and were expected to leave their tools behind when they finished work. The tutors, the drivers, the housekeepers ... each person's background had been checked except for mine, but then my background didn't matter. Josef and Karl always stayed close to their boss. The CCTV cameras were on at all times. Everyone watched everyone else. Other businessmen in Russia were careful but none of them went to these extremes. Sharkovsky was paranoid but, as I had seen for myself in that basement refrigerator, he had good reason to be.

He was extremely careful about what he ate and drank. For example, he only accepted mineral water from bottles that he had opened himself after checking that the seal had not been broken. The bottles always had to be glass. His enemies might be able to contaminate a plastic one using a hypodermic syringe. He sometimes ate food straight from the packet or the tin, pronging it into his mouth with no sign of pleasure, but if it arrived on a plate, I would have to taste it first.

Most times, I would report to the kitchen before the meals were sent out and I would eat straight out of the pans, with Josef or Karl watching over me and Pavel standing nervously to one side. It's hard to describe how I felt about this. On one level, I have to admit that there was a part of me that enjoyed it. As I have said, the food was

superb. But at the same time, it was still an unpleasant experience. First of all, one mouthful was all I was allowed and I was always aware that one mouthful might be enough to kill me. In a way, every tasting session was the same as the Russian roulette I had been forced to play on my first night. I learned to attune my senses to look out for the acrid taste of poison or simply the suspicion that something might not be right. The trouble was, by the time I detected it, it might well have killed me.

After a while, I put the whole thing out of my mind. I simply did what I was told, robotically, without complaining. You might say that I had a very strange relationship with death. The two of us were constantly together, side by side. And yet we ignored each other. In this way, we were able to get by.

What I most dreaded were the formal dinners that I was forced to attend in the huge dining room with its brilliant chandeliers, gold and white curtains, antique French table and chairs, and countless flickering candles. Sharkovsky often invited business associates and friends ... people he knew well. To begin with, I was worried that Misha Dementyev, the professor from Moscow State University, might show up. He knew Sharkovsky. Indeed he – along with my own stupidity – was the reason I was here. What would happen if he recognized me? Would it make my situation worse? But he never did appear and it occurred to me that he was probably a minor employee in Sharkovsky's empire and that it was very unlikely that he would receive an invitation. Nearly all the guests arrived in expensive cars. Some even came in their own helicopters. They were as rich and as vicious as Sharkovsky himself.

I had been given a grey suit with a white shirt and a black tie for these events – the same uniform as his bodyguards – and I would stand behind him as I had been instructed, looking down at the floor with my hands held behind my back. I was not allowed to speak. As each course was served, I would step forward and, using my own cutlery, would take a sample directly from his plate, eat it, nod and step back again. There was no doubt that Sharkovsky was afraid for his life but at the same time he was enjoying himself. He loved

playing the Roman emperor, showing me off to his other guests, deliberately humiliating me in front of them.

But if the father was bad, his son was much, much worse. Ivan Sharkovsky first became aware of me at one of those dinners and although I wasn't supposed to look at the guests, I noticed him examining me out of the corner of my eye. Ivan, a year older than me, resembled his father in many ways. He had the same dark qualities but they had been distributed differently – in his curly black hair, his heavy jowls, his down-turned mouth. He seemed to be constantly brooding about something. His father was solid and muscular. He was fat with puffy cheeks, thick lips and eyelids that were slightly too large for his eyes. Sitting hunched over the table, spooning food into his mouth, he had something brutish about him.

“Papa?” he asked. “Where did you get him from?”

“Who?” Sharkovsky was at the head of the table with Maya sitting next to him. She was wearing a huge diamond necklace that sparkled in the light. Whenever there were guests, he insisted that she smothered herself in jewellery.

“The food taster!”

“From Moscow.” Sharkovsky dismissed the question as if he had simply picked me up in a shop.

“Can he taste my food?”

Shakovsky leant forward and jabbed a fork in the direction of his son. He had been drinking heavily – champagne and vodka – and although he wasn't drunk, there was a looseness about the way he spoke. “You don't need a food taster. You're not important. Nobody would want to kill you.”

The other guests all took this as a joke and laughed uproariously, but Ivan scowled and I knew that I would be hearing from him soon.

And the very next day, he came outside and found me. It was a cold afternoon. I was washing one of his father's cars, spraying it with a hose. As soon as I saw him coming, I stopped my work and looked down. This was what I had been taught. We had to treat the whole family as if they were royalty. Part of me hoped he would simply walk on, but I could see it wasn't going to happen. I knew straight

away that I was in trouble.

“What is your name?” he asked, although of course he knew.

“Yassen Gregorovich,” I answered. That was the name I always used now.

“I’m Ivan.”

“Yes,” I said. “I know.”

He looked at me questioningly and I could feel the sense of menace hanging in the air. “But you don’t call me that, do you?”

“No ... sir.” It made me sick having to say the words but I knew that was what he wanted.

He glanced at the car. “How long has it taken you to clean that?” he asked.

“An hour,” I said. It was true. The car was the Bentley and it had been filthy. When I had finished with it, it would have to look as if it had just come out of the showroom.

“Let me help you.”

He gestured for the hose, which was still spouting water onto the ground, and, dreading what was to come, I handed it to him. First he pointed it at the car. He placed his thumb over the end so that the water rushed out in a jet. It poured over the windscreen and down over the doors. Then he turned it on me ... my head, my chest, my arms, my legs. I could only stand there uselessly as he soaked me. Had this happened in my village, I would have knocked him to the ground. Right then I had to use all my self-restraint to stop myself punching him in the face. But that was exactly what he was showing me. He had complete power over me. He could do anything to me that he wanted.

When he had finished, he smirked and handed the hose back to me. Finally, he noticed the bucket of muddy water beside the car. He kicked out, sending the contents spraying over the bodywork.

“Bad luck, Yassen,” he said. “You’re going to have to start again.”

I stood there, dripping wet, as he turned and walked away.

After that, he tormented me all the time. His father must have known what was happening – Ivan would have never acted in this way without his authority – but he allowed it to carry on. And so I

would get an order, usually transmitted by Josef, Karl or one of the housekeepers. It didn't matter if it was morning or the middle of the night. I would go up to the big house and there he would be with football boots that needed cleaning, suitcases that needed carrying or even crumpled clothes that needed ironing. He liked me to see his room, spacious and comfortable, filled with so many nice things, because he knew I lived in a small wooden cabin with nothing. And despite what Sharkovsky had said, he sometimes got me to taste his food for him, watching with delight as I leant over his plate. Often, he would play tricks with me. I would discover that he had deliberately filled the food with salt or chilli powder so that it would make me sick. I used to long for the day he would return to his school in England and I would finally be left alone.

Three years...

I grew taller and stronger. I learned to speak different languages. But otherwise I might as well have been dead. I saw nothing of the world except what was shown on the television news. The horror of my situation was not the drudgery of my work and the daily humiliations I received. It was in the dawning realization that I might be here for the rest of my life, that even as an old man I might be cleaning toilets and corridors and, worse still, that I might be grateful. Already, I could feel part of myself accepting what I had turned into. I no longer thought about escaping. I didn't even think about what might exist on the other side of the wall. Once, I found myself looking in the mirror because there was a stain on my shirt. There was to be a dinner that night and I was genuinely embarrassed, afraid I would let my master down. At that moment I was disgusted with myself. I saw, quite clearly, what I was becoming ... perhaps what I had already become.

I never thought of Estrov. It was as if my parents had not existed. Even my time in Moscow seemed far behind me. It was obvious that Dima would never find me and even if he did I would be out of his reach. All I could think about was the work I would do the next day. This was Sharkovsky's revenge. He had allowed me to keep my life but he had taken away my humanity.

And so it might have continued.

But things changed quite suddenly in the early summer of my third year of captivity. Ivan had just finished his last year at Harrow and was due back any time. Svetlana was staying with friends near the Black Sea. Sharkovsky was having another dinner party and I had been told to report to the dining room to help with the preparations.

For some reason, I arrived early. As I walked up to the house, a car passed me and stopped at the front door. A man got out, rang the bell and hurried inside. I had seen him before. His name was Brodsky and he was one of Sharkovsky's business associates from Moscow. The two of them owned several companies together and they were connected in other ways it was probably best not to know. I went into the kitchen and a few moments later, the telephone rang. Mr Brodsky wanted tea. Pavel was busy preparing the dinner – a broiled Atlantic salmon, which he was decorating with red and black caviar. The housekeepers were laying the table. I was there and in my suit so I made the tea and carried it up.

I crossed the hallway, which was now so familiar to me that I could have made my way blindfolded. The sweeping staircase, the marble pillars, the huge bowl of flowers and the chandelier no longer meant anything to me. I had seen them too often. The door to the study was half open as I approached and normally I would have knocked and entered, set the tray down on a table and left as quickly as I could. But this time, just as I drew close, I heard a single word that stopped me in my tracks and rooted me to the floor.

“They're asking questions about it again. Estrov. We're going to have to do something before the situation gets out of hand...”

Estrov.

My village.

It had been Brodsky who had spoken. Estrov. What could he possibly know about Estrov? Hardly daring to breathe, I waited for Sharkovsky to reply.

“You can deal with it, Mikhail.”

“It's not as easy as that, Vladimir. These are Western journalists, working in London. If they connect you with what happened...”

“Why should they?”

“They’re not stupid. They’ve already discovered you were a shareholder.”

“So what?” Sharkovsky didn’t sound concerned. “There were lots of shareholders. What exactly am I supposed to have done?”

“You wanted them to raise productivity. You wanted more profit. You ordered them to change the safety procedures.”

“Are you accusing me, Mikhail?”

“No. Of course not. I’m your closest advisor and your friend and why should I care if a few peasants got killed? But these people smell a story. And it would be seriously damaging to us if the name of Estrov were to be mentioned in the British press or anywhere else.”

“It was all taken care of at the time,” Sharkovsky replied. “There was no evidence left. Our friends in the ministry made sure of that. It never happened! Let these stupid journalists sniff around and ask questions. They won’t find anything. And if I do come to believe that they are dangerous to me or to my business, then I’ll deal with them. Even in London there are car accidents. Now stop worrying and have a drink.”

“I ordered tea.”

“It should be here. I’ll call down.”

It was a miracle I hadn’t been caught listening outside. If Karl or Josef had come down the stairs and seen me, I would have been beaten. But I couldn’t go in quite yet. I had to wait for the echoes of the conversation to die away. I counted to ten, then knocked on the door and entered. I kept my face blank. It was vital that they should not know that I had heard them talking. But as I crossed the carpet to where the visitor was sitting, the cup and the saucer rattled on the silver tray and I’m sure there can’t have been any colour in my face.

Sharkovsky barely glanced at me. “What took you so long, Yassen?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I said. “I had to wait for the kettle to boil.”

“Very well. Get out.”

I bowed and left as quickly as I could.

I was shaking by the time I returned to the hall. It was as if all the

pain and misery I had suffered in the last three years had been bundled together and then slammed into me, delivering one final, knock-out blow. It wasn't enough that Vladimir Sharkovsky had been endlessly cruel to me. It wasn't enough that he had reduced me to the role of his mindless slave. He was also directly implicated in the deaths of my mother and father, of Leo and of everyone else in the village.

Was it really such a surprise? When I had first heard his name, it had been at the university in Moscow. He had been talking to Misha Dementyev on the telephone and Dementyev had been implicated in what had happened. Nigel Brown had warned me too. He had told me that Sharkovsky invested in chemicals. I should have made the connection. And yet how could I have? It was almost beyond belief.

That night, as I stood at the table watching him tear apart the salmon that I had just tasted in front of all the other guests, I swore that I would kill him. It was surely the reason why fate had brought me here and it no longer mattered if I lived or died.

I would kill him. I swore it to myself.

I would kill him.

I would kill.

МЕХАНИК

THE MECHANIC

I barely slept that night. Every time I closed my eyes, my thoughts turned to guns, to kitchen knives, to the forks and spades that were used in the garden, to hammers and fire axes. The truth was that I was surrounded by weapons. Sharkovsky was used to having me around. I could reach him and have my revenge for Estrov before anyone knew what had happened.

But what good would it do? Josef and Karl – of course I knew which was which by now – were always nearby and even assuming I could get to Sharkovsky before they stopped me, they would deal with me immediately afterwards. Lying in my simple wooden bed, in my empty room, looking at the cold light of day, I saw that any action on my part would only lead to my own death. There had to be another way.

I felt sick and unhappy. I remembered Fagin with his leather notebook, reading out the different names and addresses in Moscow. Why had I made this choice?

Once again, and for the first time in a very long while, I thought about escape. I knew what the stakes were. If I tried and failed, I would die. But one way or another, this had to end.

I had just one advantage. By now I knew everything about the *dacha* and that included all the security arrangements. I took out one of the exercise books that Nigel Brown had given me – it was full of English vocabulary – and turned to an empty page at the back. Then, using a pencil, I drew a sketch of the compound and, resting it on my knees, I began to consider the best way out.

There wasn't one.

CCTV cameras covered every inch of the gardens. Climbing the wall was impossible. Quite apart from the razor wire, there were sensors buried under the lawn and they would register my footfall before

I got close. Could I approach one of the guards? No. They were all far too afraid of Sharkovsky. What about his wife, Maya? Could I somehow persuade her to take me on one of her shopping trips to Moscow? It was a ridiculous idea. She had no reason to help me.

Even if I did miraculously make it to the other side, what was I to do next? I was surrounded by countryside – the Silver Forest – with no idea of how near I was to the nearest bus stop or station. If I made it to Moscow, I could go back to Tverskaya Street. I had no doubt that Dima would hide me ... assuming he was still there. But Sharkovsky would use all his police and underworld contacts to hunt me down. It wouldn't bother him that he had been keeping me a prisoner for three years and he had treated me in a way that was certainly illegal. It was just that we had made a deal and he would make sure I kept it. I worked for him or I was dead.

For the next few weeks, everything went on as before. I cleaned, I washed, I bowed, I scraped. But for me, nothing was the same. I could hardly bear to be in the same room as Sharkovsky. Tasting his food made me physically sick. This was the man responsible for what had happened to Estrov, the unnamed investor my parents had been complaining about the night before they died. If I couldn't escape from him, I would go mad. I would kill him or I would kill myself. I simply couldn't stay here any more.

I had hidden the exercise book under my mattress and every night I took it out and jotted down my thoughts. Slowly, I realized that I had been right from the very start. There was only one way out of this place – and that was the Bell JetRanger helicopter. I turned to a new page and wrote down the name of the pilot, Arkady Zelin, then underlined it twice. What did I know about him? How could I persuade him to take me out of here? Did he have any weaknesses, anything I could exploit?

We had known each other for three years but I wouldn't say we were friends. Zelin was a very solitary person, often preferring to eat alone. Even so, it was impossible to live in such close confinement without giving things away and the fact was that we did talk to each other, particularly when we were playing cards. Zelin liked the fact

that I was interested in helicopters. He'd even let me examine the workings of the engine once or twice, when he was stripping it down for general maintenance, although he had drawn the line at allowing me to sit in the cockpit. The security guards wouldn't have been happy about that. And then there was Nigel Brown. He knew a bit about Zelin too and when he'd had a few drinks he would share it with me.

Arkady Zelin

Soviet Air Force. Gambling?

Saratov.

Wife? Son.

Skiing... France/Switzerland. Retire?

This was about the total knowledge that I had of the man who might fly me out of the *dacha*. I wrote it down in my exercise book and stared at the useless words, sitting there on the empty page.

What did they add up to?

Zelin had been in the Soviet Air Force but he'd been caught stealing money from a friend. There had been a court martial and he had been forced to leave. He was still bitter about the whole thing and claimed that he was innocent, that he had been set up, but the truth was he was always broke. It was possible that he was addicted to gambling. I often saw him looking at the racing pages in the newspapers and once or twice I heard him making bets over the phone.

Zelin owned a crummy flat in the city of Saratov, on the Volga River, but he hardly ever went there. He had three weeks' holiday a year – he often complained it wasn't enough – and he liked to travel abroad, to Switzerland or France in the winter. He loved skiing. He once told me that he would like to work in a ski resort and had talked briefly about heli-skiing – flying rich people to the top of glaciers and watching them ski down. He had been married and he carried a photograph in his wallet ... a boy who was about eleven or twelve years old, presumably his son. I remembered the day when I had come into the recreation room with a huge bruise on my face. I'd

made a bad job of polishing the silver and Josef had lost control and almost knocked me out. Zelin had seen me and although he had said nothing, I could tell he was shocked. Perhaps I could appeal to him as a father? On the other hand, he never spoke about his son ... or his wife, for that matter. He never saw either of them; perhaps they had cut him out of their life. He was quite lonely. He was the sort of person who looks after number one simply because there is nobody else.

I could have scribbled until I had filled the entire exercise book but it wasn't going to help very much. Sharkovsky had a number of trips abroad that summer and each time he left in the helicopter, I would stop whatever I was doing and watch the machine rise from the launch pad and hover over the trees before disappearing into the sky. I had nothing I could offer – no money, no bribe. I knew that there was no way Zelin was going to fall out with his employer. In the end I forgot about him and began to think of other plans.

We came to the end of another summer and I swore to myself that it would be my last at the *dacha*, that by Christmas I would be gone. And yet August bled into September and nothing changed. I was feeling sick and angry with myself. No only had I not escaped, I hadn't even tried. Worse still, Ivan Sharkovsky had returned. He had left Harrow by now and was on his way to Oxford University. Presumably his father had offered to pay for a new library or a swimming pool because I'm not sure there was any other way he'd have got in.

I was in the garden when I first saw him, pushing a wheelbarrow full of leaves, taking it down to the compost heap. Suddenly he was standing there in front of me, blocking my path. Age had not improved him. He was still overweight. We were both about the same height but he was much heavier than me. I stopped at once and bowed my head.

“Yassen!” he said, spitting out the two syllables in a sing-song voice. “Are you glad to see me?”

“Yes, sir,” I lied.

“Still slaving for my dad?”

“Yes, sir.”

He smirked at me. Then he reached down and picked up a handful of filthy leaves from the wheelbarrow. I was wearing a tracksuit and, very deliberately, he shoved the leaves down the front of my chest. Then he laughed and walked away.

From that moment on, there was a new, very disturbing edge to his behaviour. His attacks on me became more physical. If he was angry with me, he would slap me or punch me, which was something he had never done before. Once, at the dinner table, I spilt some of his wine and he picked up a fork and jabbed it into my thigh. His father saw this but said nothing. In a way, the two of them were equally mad. I was afraid that Ivan wouldn't be satisfied until I was dead.

That was the month that Nigel Brown was fired. He wasn't particularly surprised. He was no longer tutoring Ivan, and his sister, Svetlana, had been accepted into Cheltenham Ladies' College in England so there was nothing left for him to do. Mr Brown was sixty by now and his teaching days were over. He talked about going back to Norfolk but he didn't seem to have any fondness for the place. It's often interested me how some people can follow a single path through life that takes them to somewhere they don't want to be. It was hard to believe that this crumpled old man with his vodka and his tweed jacket had once been a child, full of hopes and dreams. Was this what he had been born to be?

I was having dinner with him one evening, shortly before he left. Arkady Zelin had joined us. He had returned from Moscow that morning with Sharkovsky, who had flown in from the United States. Mr Brown hadn't begun drinking yet – at least he'd only had a couple of glasses – and he was in a reflective mood.

“You're going to have to keep up your languages, Yassen, once I'm gone,” he was saying. “Maybe they'll let me send you books. There are very good tapes these days.”

He was being kind but I knew he didn't really mean what he was saying. Once he was gone, I would never hear from him again.

“What about you, Arkady?” he went on. “Are you going to stay working here?”

“I have no reason to leave,” Zelin said.

“No. I can see you’re doing well for yourself. Nice new watch!”

It was typical of my teacher to notice a detail like that. When we were doing exercises together, he could instantly spot a single misspelt word in the middle of a whole page. I glanced at Zelin’s wrist just in time to see him draw it away, covering it with his sleeve.

“It was given to me,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

“A Rolex?”

“Why do you interest yourself in things that don’t concern you? Why don’t you mind your own business?”

For the rest of the meal, Zelin barely spoke – and when he had finished eating he left the room, even though we’d agreed to play cards. I did an hour’s German with Mr Brown but my heart wasn’t in it and in the end he gave up, dragged the bottle off the table and plonked himself in an armchair in the corner. I was left on my own, thinking. It was a small detail. A new Rolex. But it was strange the way Zelin had tried to conceal it, and why had it made him so angry?

I might have forgotten all about it but the next day something else happened which brought it back to my mind. Sharkovsky was leaving for Leningrad at the end of the week. It was an important visit and he much preferred to fly than go by road. During the course of the morning, I saw Zelin working on the helicopter, carrying out a routine inspection. There was nothing unusual about that. But just before lunch, he presented himself at the house. I happened to be close by, cleaning the ground-floor windows, and I heard every word that was said.

“I’m very sorry, sir,” he said. “We can’t use the helicopter.”

Sharkovsky had come to the front door, dressed in riding gear. He had taken up riding the year before and had bought two horses – one for himself, one for his wife. He’d also built a stable close to the tennis court and employed one of the gardeners as a groom. Zelin was standing in his overalls, wiping his hands on a white handkerchief that was smeared with oil.

“What’s wrong with it?” Sharkovsky snapped. He had been very short-tempered recently. There was a rumour that things hadn’t been

going too well with his business. Maybe that was why he had been travelling so much.

“There’s been a servo actuator malfunction, sir,” Zelin said. “One of the piston rods shows signs of cracking. It’s going to have to be replaced.”

“Can you do it?”

“No, sir. Not really. Anyway, we have to order the part...”

Sharkovsky was in a hurry. “Well, why don’t you call in the mechanic ... what’s his name ... Borodin?”

“I called his office just now. It’s annoying but he’s ill.” He paused. “They can send someone else.”

“Reliable?”

“Yes, sir. His name is Rykov. I’ve worked with him.”

“All right. See to it.”

Maya was waiting for him. He stormed off without saying another word.

I didn’t know for certain that Zelin was lying but I had a feeling that something was wrong. Every day at the *dacha* was the same. When I say that life went like clockwork, I mean it had that same dull, mechanical quality. But now there were three coincidences and they had all happened at the same time. The helicopter had been fine the day before but suddenly it was broken. The usual mechanic – a brisk, talkative man who turned up every couple of months – was mysteriously ill. And then there was that new watch, and the strange way that Zelin had behaved.

There was something else. It occurred to me that it really wasn’t so difficult to replace a piston rod. I had been reading helicopter magazines all my life and knew almost as much as if I’d actually been flying myself. I was sure that Zelin would have a spare and should have been able to fix it himself.

So what was he up to? I said nothing, but for the rest of the day I kept my eye on him and when the new mechanic arrived that same afternoon, I made sure I was there.

He came in a green van marked MVZ Helicopters and I saw him step out to have his passport and employment papers checked by the

guards. He was a short, plump man with a mop of grey hair that sprawled over his head and several folds of fat around his chin. He was dressed in green overalls with the same initials, MVZ, on the top pocket. He had to wait while the guards searched his van – for once, their metal detectors weren't going to help them. The back was jammed with spare parts. He didn't seem to mind though. He stood there smoking a cigarette and when they finally let him through he gave them a friendly wave and drove straight across to the helicopter pad. Arkady Zelin was waiting for him there and they spent the rest of the day working together, stripping down the engine and doing whatever it was they had to do.

It was a warm afternoon, and at four o'clock one of the housekeepers sent me over to the helicopter with a tray of lemonade and sandwiches. The mechanic – Rykov – came strutting towards me with a smile on his face.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“My name is Yassen, sir.”

“And what's in these sandwiches?” He prised one open with a grimy thumb. “Ham and cheese. Thanks, Yassen. That's very nice of you.” He was already eating, talking with his mouth full. Then he signalled to Zelin and the two of them went back to work.

I saw him a second time when I came back to pick up the tray. Once again he was pleased to see me but I thought that Zelin was more restrained. He was quieter than I had ever known him and this was a man I knew fairly well. You cannot play cards with someone and not get a sense of the way they think. I would have said he was nervous. I wondered why he wasn't wearing his new watch today. By now, the helicopter was almost completely reassembled. I lingered with the two men, waiting to take back the tray. And it seemed only natural to chat.

“Do you fly these?” I asked the mechanic.

“Not me,” he said. “I just take them apart and put them back together.”

“Is it difficult?”

“You have to know what you're doing.”

“Wouldn’t you like to fly?”

He shook his head. “Not really.” He took out a cigarette and lit it. “I wouldn’t know what to do with a joystick between my legs. I prefer to keep my feet safely on the ground.”

“That’s enough, Yassen,” Zelin growled. “Don’t you have work to do? Go and do it.”

“Yes, Mr Zelin.”

I picked up the tray with the dirty glasses and carried it back to the house. But I’d already discovered everything I needed to know. The mechanic knew nothing about helicopters. Even I could have told him that a Bell helicopter doesn’t have a joystick. It has a cyclic control which transmits instructions to the rotor blades. And it’s not in front of you. It’s to one side. Zelin had lied about the malfunction just as he had lied about the usual mechanic, Borodin, being sick. I was sure of it.

From that moment, I didn’t let them out of my sight. I knew I would get into trouble. There were ten pairs of shoes I was meant to polish and a whole pile of crates to be broken up in the cellar. But there was no way I was going to disappear inside. Zelin was planning something. If Rykov wasn’t a helicopter mechanic, what was he? A thief? A spy? It didn’t matter. Zelin had brought him into the compound and had to be part of it. This was the opportunity I’d been waiting for. I could blackmail him. Suddenly I saw him with his hand on the cyclic. He could fly me out.

My biggest worry was that Ivan would return to the *dacha*. He’d gone into Moscow for the day, driving the new Mercedes sports car that his father had bought him for his birthday, but if he came back and saw me, the chances were that he would find some task for me to do. At five o’clock there was still no sign of him but Sharkovsky and his wife returned from a ride and I helped them down from the saddle and walked the horses back to the stable. All the gardeners had gone. There were just the usual guards, walking in pairs, unaware that anything unusual was going on.

As I got back to the house, I heard the helicopter start up, the whine of the engine rising as the rotors picked up speed. There was no sign

of Rykov but the van with the MVZ logo was still parked close by so I knew he couldn't have left. I pretended to walk into the house but at the last minute I hurried forward and ducked behind one of the cars. It was actually the Lexus that had first brought me here. If anyone found me there, I would pretend I was cleaning it.

I could see Arkady Zelin inside the cockpit, checking the controls, and suddenly the mechanic emerged from the other side of the helicopter and began to walk towards me, towards the house, carrying a sheaf of papers. If the guards had seen him, it would have looked completely natural. He had finished the job and he needed someone to sign the documentation. But he was being careful. He kept to the shadows. Nobody except me saw him go in through the side door.

I followed. I didn't know what I was going to do because I still hadn't worked out what was happening. All I knew was, it wasn't what it seemed.

I crept down the corridor past the service rooms – the laundry and the boot room, where I had spent so many hundreds of hours, day and night, in mindless drudgery. There was nobody around and that was very unusual. The mechanic couldn't have just walked into the house. One of the housekeepers would have challenged him and then made him wait while she went to fetch Josef or Karl. Rykov had only entered a few seconds ahead of me. He should have been here now. I felt the silence all around me. None of the lights were on. I glanced into the kitchen. There was a pot of soup or stew bubbling away on top of the stove but no sign of Pavel.

I was tempted to call out but something told me to stay quiet. I continued past the pantry. The door was ajar and that too was strange, as it was always kept locked in case the dog went in. I pushed it open and at that moment everything made sense. It should have been obvious from the start. How could I have been so slow not to see it?

The housekeeper was there, lying on the floor. I had lost count of the number of times that Nina had snapped at me, scolding me for being too slow or too clumsy, hitting me on the head whenever she

got the chance. I could see the wooden spoon still tucked into her apron but she wasn't going to be using it. She had been shot at close range, obviously with a silencer because I hadn't heard the sound of the gun. She was on her back with her hands spread out, as if in surprise. There was a pool of blood around her shoulders.

Arkady Zelin had been bribed. There was no other explanation. He never had any money but suddenly he had an expensive new watch. Rykov was an assassin who had come here to kill Sharkovsky. The safest way to smuggle a gun into the compound – perhaps the only way to get past the metal detectors and X-ray machines – was to bring it in a truck packed with metal equipment. It would have been easy enough to dismantle it and scatter the separate parts among the other machinery. And the fastest way out after he had done his work was the helicopter, which was waiting even now, with the rotors at full velocity.

My mouth was dry. My every instinct was to turn and run. If Rykov saw me, he would kill me without even thinking about it, just as he had killed Nina. But I didn't leave. I couldn't. This was the only chance I would ever get and I had to take it. There was a small axe hanging in the pantry. I had used it until there were blisters all over my hands, chopping kindling for the fire in Sharkovsky's study. Making as little noise as possible and doing my best not to look at the dead woman, I unhooked it. An axe would be little use against a gun, but even so, I felt safer having some sort of weapon. I continued to the door that led into the main hall. It was half open. Hardly daring to breathe, I looked through.

I had arrived just in time for the endgame.

The hall was in shadow. The sun was setting behind the house and its last rays were too low to reach the windows. The lights were out. I could hear the shrill whine of the helicopter outside in the distance but a curtain of silence seemed to have fallen on the house. Josef was lying on the stairs, where he had been gunned down. Rykov was standing in front of me, edging forward, an automatic pistol with a silencer in his hand.

He was making his way towards the study, his feet making no sound

on the thick carpet. But even as I watched, the door of the study opened and Vladimir Sharkovsky came out, dressed in a suit and tie but with his jacket off. He must have heard the disturbance, the body tumbling down the stairs, and had come out to see what was happening.

“What...?” he began.

Rykov didn't say anything. He stepped forward and shot my employer three times, the bullets thudding into his chest and stomach so quietly that I barely heard them. The effect was catastrophic. Sharkovsky was thrown backwards ... off his feet. His head hit the carpet first. If the bullets hadn't killed him, he would surely have broken his neck. His legs jerked then became still.

What did I feel at that moment? Nothing. Of course I wasn't going to waste any tears on Sharkovsky. I was glad he was dead. But I couldn't find it in myself to celebrate the death of another human being. I was frightened. I was still wondering how I could turn this to my advantage. Everything was happening so quickly that I didn't have time to work out my emotions. I suppose I was in a state of shock.

And then a voice came floating out of the darkness.

“Don't turn round. Put the gun down!”

Rykov twisted his head but saw nothing. I was hiding behind the door, out of sight. It was Karl. He had come up from the cellar. Maybe he had been looking for me, wondering why I hadn't broken up those crates. He was behind Rykov and over to one side, edging into the hall with a gun clasped in both hands, holding it at the same level as his head.

Rykov froze. He was still holding the gun he had used to kill Sharkovsky and I wondered if he'd had time to reload. He had fired at least five bullets. Rykov couldn't see where the order had come from but he remained completely calm. “I will pay you one hundred thousand rubles to let me leave here,” he said. He sounded very different from the mechanic I had spoken to. His voice was younger, more cultivated.

“Who sent you?”

“Scorpia.”

The word meant nothing to me. Nor did it seem to have any significance for Karl. “Lower your gun very slowly,” he said. “Put it on the carpet where I can see it ... in front of you.”

There was nothing Rykov could do. If he couldn't see the bodyguard, he couldn't kill him. He lowered the gun to the floor.

“Kick it away.”

“If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else,” Rykov said. “Do yourself a favour. You're out of a job. Take the money and go.”

Silence. Rykov knew he had to do what he was told. He kicked the gun across the carpet. It came to a halt a few inches away from the dead man.

Karl stepped further into the hall, still holding his gun in both hands. It was aimed at the back of Rykov's neck. He glanced to the right and saw Josef lying spreadeagled on the stairs. Something flickered across his face and I had no doubt that he was going to shoot down the man who had been responsible for the death of his brother. As he moved forward, his path took him in front of the door where I was standing and suddenly I was behind him.

“One hundred and fifty thousand rubles,” Rykov said. “More money than you will ever see in your life.”

“You have killed my brother.”

Rykov understood. There was no point in arguing. In Russia, blood ties, particularly between brothers, are strong.

Karl was very close to him now and without really thinking about it, I made the decision – probably the most momentous of my life. I slipped through the door and, raising the axe, took three steps into the hall. The bodyguard heard me at the very last moment but it was too late. Using the blunt end, I brought the axe swinging down and hit him on the back of the head. He collapsed in front of me, his arms, his legs, his entire body suddenly limp. The mechanic moved incredibly fast. He didn't know what had happened but he dived forward, reaching out for the gun he had just kicked away. But I was faster. Before he could grab it, I had dropped the axe and swept up

Karl's gun and already I was aiming it straight at him, doing my best to stop my hand shaking.

Rykov saw me and stared. He was unarmed. He couldn't believe what had just happened. "You!" he exclaimed.

"Listen to me," I said. "I could shoot you now. If I fire a single shot, everyone will come. You'll never get away."

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I want to get out of here."

"I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. You have to help me!" I scrabbled for words. "I knew you weren't really a mechanic. I knew you and Zelin were working together. But I didn't say anything. It's thanks to me that you managed to do what you came for." I nodded at the body of Vladimir Sharkovsky.

"I will give you money..."

"I don't want money. I want you to take me with you. I never chose to come here. I'm a prisoner. I'm their slave. All I'm asking is for you to take me as far away as you can and then to leave me. I don't care about you or who you're working for. I'm glad he's dead. Do you understand? Is it a deal?"

He pretended to think ... but only very briefly. The helicopter was still whining outside and very soon one of the guards might ask what was happening. Arkady Zelin might panic and take off without him. Rykov didn't have any time. "Let me get my gun," he said. He stretched out his hand.

"No!" I tightened my grip. "We'll leave together. It'll be better for you that way. The guards know me and they're less likely to ask questions." He still seemed to be hesitating, so I added, "You do it my way or you never leave."

He nodded, once. "Very well. Let's go."

We left together, back down the corridor, past the room with the dead woman. I was terrified. I was with a man who had just killed three people without even blinking and I knew that he would make me the fourth if I gave him the slightest chance. I made sure I didn't get too close to him. If he hit out at me or tried to grab me, I would

fire the gun. This one wasn't silenced. The sound of the explosion would act as a general alarm.

Rykov didn't seem at all concerned. He didn't speak as we left the house and walked through the half-darkness together, skirting the fountain and making our way across the lawn towards the helicopter. And it had been true, what I had told him. One of the guards saw us but did nothing. The fact that I was walking with him meant that everything had to be OK.

But Zelin was shocked when he saw the two of us together. "What is he doing?" he shouted.

I could barely hear a word he said but the meaning was obvious. I was struggling to keep the gun steady, feeling the wind from the rotors buffeting my arms. I knew that this was the most dangerous part. As we climbed in, the mechanic could wrench the gun away and kill me with it. He could probably kill me with his bare hands. I wasn't sure if I should go in first or second. What if he had another gun hidden under one of the seats?

I made my decision. "I'm getting in first!" I shouted. "You follow!"

As I climbed into the back seat, I kept the gun pointed at Zelin, not the mechanic. I knew that he couldn't fly. If he tried anything, I would shoot the pilot and we would both be stuck. I think he understood my strategy. There was actually something close to a smile as he climbed into the seat next to the pilot.

Zelin shouted something else. The mechanic leant forward and shouted back into his ear. Again, it was impossible to hear. For all I knew, he was sentencing me to death. I might have the advantage now but their moment would come while we were flying or perhaps when we landed. I wouldn't be able to keep them both covered and one of them would get me.

An alarm went off in the house, even louder than the scream of the helicopter. At once, the arc lamps all exploded into life. Two of the guards started running towards us, lifting their weapons. At the same time, a jeep appeared from the gatehouse, its headlamps blazing, tearing across the grass. The mechanic slammed the door and Zelin hit the controls. The muzzles of the automatic machine guns were

flashing in the darkness. Machine-gun bullets were strafing past. One of them hit the cockpit but ricocheted away uselessly and I realized that, of course, it must be armoured glass.

The helicopter rose. It turned. It rocked above the lawn as if anchored there, unable to lift off. Bullets filled the air like fireflies.

And then Zelin jerked the cyclic. The helicopter twisted round one last time and, carrying me with it, soared away, over the wall, over the forest and into the darkening sky.

БОЛТИНО

I had done it. For the first time in three long years I was outside the compound. Even if I hadn't been sitting in a helicopter, I would have felt as if I was flying.

Sharkovsky was dead. It was nothing less than he deserved and I was glad that he would not be able to come after me. Would I be blamed for his death? The guards had seen me leave with Rykov. They knew I was part of what had happened. But I had not been the one who had invited the mechanic into the house. That had been Zelin. With a bit of luck, Sharkovsky's people would concentrate on the two of them and they would forget about me.

I was not safe yet. Far from it.

Both Zelin and Rykov had put on headphones and although the blast of the rotors made conversation impossible for me, they were able to talk freely. What were they planning? I knew Zelin had been angry to see me but he was not the one in charge. Everything depended on Rykov. It might well be that he had already radioed ahead. There could be people waiting for me when we landed. I could be dragged out of my seat and shot. I knew already that human life meant nothing to the so-called mechanic. He had killed Nina, Josef and Sharkovsky without batting an eyelid. It would make no difference to him if he added an unknown teenager to the score.

But I didn't care. I hated myself at the *dacha*. I was eighteen years old, still cleaning toilets and sweeping corridors, kneeling in front of Ivan to polish his shoes or, worse, performing like a trained monkey at his father's dinner parties. It had been necessary to do these things to live but what was the point of a life so debased? If I were to die now, at least it would be on my own terms. I had grabbed hold of the opportunity. I had escaped. I had proved to myself that I was not beaten after all.

And there were so many other things I was experiencing for the first time. I had never flown before. Even to sit in the luxurious leather seat of the Bell JetRanger was extraordinary. It had once been my dream to fly helicopters and here I was, gazing over Zelin's shoulder, watching him as he manipulated the controls. I wished I could see more of the countryside but it was already dark and the outskirts of Moscow were little more than a scattering of electric lights. I didn't mind if I was being taken to my death. I was happy! Sharkovsky was finished. I had got away. I was flying.

After about ten minutes, Rykov turned round with a plastic bottle of water in his hand. He was offering it to me. I shook my head. At the same time, I retreated into the furthest corner, once again raising the gun. I was afraid of a trick. Rykov shrugged as if to say that I was making a mistake, but he understood and turned back again. We continued for another half-hour, then began to descend. It was only the pressure in my ears that warned me. Looking out of the window, everything seemed to be black and I got the idea we must be above water. Gently we touched down. Zelin hit the controls and the engine stopped, the rotors slowing down.

Rykov took off his headphones and hung them up. Then he turned to me. "What now?" he asked.

"Where are we?" I demanded.

"On the edge of a town called Boltino. To the north of Moscow." He unfastened his seat belt. "You have your wish, Yassen. You have escaped from Vladimir Sharkovsky. I'm sure we all agree that the world is a better place without him. As for Arkady and me, we have a plane waiting to take us on the next leg of our journey. I'm afraid we have to say goodbye."

Ignoring the gun, almost forgetting I was there, Rykov opened the door and let himself out of the helicopter.

Arkady Zelin faced me. "You shouldn't have done this," he hissed. "You don't know these people..."

"Who are they?" I asked. I remembered the name I had heard. "Scorpia..."

"They will kill you." He undid his own belt and scrambled out,

following the mechanic.

Suddenly I didn't want to be left on my own. I went after them. Looking around me, I had no idea why we had landed here. The helicopter was resting on a strip of mud that was so light-coloured that on second thoughts I realized it must be sand. An expanse of water stretched out next to it with about thirty sailing boats and cruisers moored to a jetty. There were trees on either side of us and what looked like wooden hangars or warehouses behind. The mechanic had been doing something to himself as I climbed down and by the time I reached him I was astonished to see that he had completely changed his appearance. The tangled grey hair was a wig. His hair was the same colour as mine, short and neatly cut. There had been something in his mouth, which had changed the shape of his face, and the folds of flesh around his chin had gone. He was suddenly slimmer and younger. He stripped out of his oily overalls. Underneath he was wearing a black T-shirt and jeans. The man who had come to the *dacha* in a green van marked MVZ Helicopters had disappeared. Nobody would ever see him again.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"We are leaving the country."

"In a boat?"

"In a plane, Yassen." I looked around me, confused. How could a plane possibly land here? "A seaplane," he went on. "Don't you see it?"

And there it was, sitting flat on the water with a pilot already in the cockpit, waiting to fly them to their next destination. The seaplane was white. It had two propellers perched high up on the wings and a tail that was higher still so that even without moving it looked as if it was trying to lift itself into the air.

"Take me with you," I said.

The mechanic who was no longer a mechanic smiled once again. "Why should I do that?"

I still had the gun. I could have forced him to take me ... or tried to. But I knew that was a bad idea, that it would only end up getting me killed. Instead, I had to make a gesture, to show them I could be

trusted. It was a terrible risk but I knew there was no other way. I turned the gun round in my hand and gave it to him. He looked genuinely surprised. He could shoot me where I stood and no one would be any the wiser. Apart from Zelin and the waiting pilot, there was nobody near.

“I saved your life,” I said. “Back at the *dacha* ... Karl would have shot you. And I don’t know why you killed Sharkovsky but you couldn’t have hated him more than I did. We’re on the same side.”

He weighed the gun. Zelin watched the two of us, his face pale.

“I’m not on any side. I was paid to kill him,” Rykov said.

“Then take me with you. It doesn’t matter where you’re going. Maybe I can work for you. I can be useful to you. I’ll do anything you tell me. I speak three languages. I...” My voice trailed away.

Rykov was still holding the gun. Perhaps he was amused. Perhaps he was wondering where to fire the next bullet. It was impossible to tell what was going on in his head. Eventually he spoke – but not to me. “What do you think, Arkady?” asked.

“I think we should leave,” Zelin said.

“With or without our extra passenger?”

There was a pause and I knew my life was hanging in the balance. Arkady Zelin had known me for three years. He had played cards with me. I had never been a threat to him. Surely he wouldn’t abandon me now.

At last he made up his mind. “With him, if you like. He’s not so bad. And they treated him like a dog.”

“Very well.” Rykov slid the gun into his waistband. “It may well be that my employers have a use for you. They can make the final decision. But until then, you do exactly as you’re told.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s no need to call me that.”

He was already walking down the jetty to the plane. The pilot saw him and flicked on the engine. It sounded like one of the petrol lawnmowers at the *dacha* and, looking at the tiny propellers, the ungainly wings, I wondered how it could possibly separate itself from the water and fly. Arkady Zelin was carrying a travel bag, which he

had brought from the helicopter. It occurred to me that everything he owned must be inside it. He was leaving Russia and, if he was wise, he would never come back. Sharkovsky's people might leave me alone but they would certainly be looking for him. It was impossible to say how much Zelin had been paid for his part in all this but I hoped the price included a completely new identity.

We got into the plane, a four-seater. I was lucky there was room for me. The new pilot ignored me. He knew better than to ask unnecessary questions.

But I had to know. "Where are we going?" I asked for a second time.

"To Venice," Rykov said.

"And to Scorpia," he might have added. The most dangerous criminal organization in the world. And I was about to walk right into its arms.

ВЕНЕЦИЯ

VENICE

It was night-time when we landed.

Once again we came plunging out of the darkness with only the sound of the engine and the rising feeling in my stomach to tell me we had reached the end of our journey. The seaplane hit the water, bounced, then skimmed along the surface before finally coming to rest. The pilot turned off the engine and we were suddenly sitting in complete silence, rocking gently on the water. Looking out of the window, I could make out a few lights twinkling in the distance. I glanced at Rykov, his face illuminated by the glow of the control panels, trying to work out what was going on in his mind. I was still afraid he would turn round and shoot me. He gave nothing away.

What next?

Although I didn't know it at the time, Venice was a perfect destination for those travelling by seaplane, particularly if they wished to arrive without being seen. It is possible, of course, that the Italian police and air traffic control had been bribed but nobody seemed to have noticed that we had landed. For about two minutes, no one spoke. Then I heard the deep throb of an engine and, with my face pressed against the window, I saw a motor launch slip out of the darkness and draw up next to us. The pilot opened the door and we climbed out.

The motor launch was about thirty feet long, made of wood, with a cabin at the front and leather seats behind. There were two men on board, a captain and a deckhand who helped us climb down. If they were surprised to find themselves with an extra passenger, they didn't show it. They said nothing. Rykov gestured and I sat out in the open at the back of the launch, even though the night was chilly. Zelin sat opposite me. He was clutching his travel bag, deep in thought.

We set off and as we went I heard the seaplane start up and take off

again. I was already impressed. Everything about this operation had been well planned and executed down to the last detail. There had been only one mistake ... and that was me. It took us about ten minutes to make the crossing, pulling into a ramshackle wooden jetty with striped poles slanting in different directions. Rykov stepped out and waited for me to follow but Zelin stayed where he was and I realized he was not coming with us.

I held out a hand to the helicopter pilot. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you for letting me come with you."

"That place was horrible and Sharkovsky was beneath contempt," Zelin replied. "All those things they did to you... I'm sorry I didn't help."

"It's over now."

"For both of us." He shook my hand. "I hope it works out for you, Yassen. Take care."

I climbed onto the jetty and the boat pulled away. Moments later it had disappeared over the lagoon.

Rykov and I continued on foot. He took me to a flat in an area near the old dockyards where we had disembarked. Why do I call him Rykov? As I was soon to discover, it was not his name. He was not a mechanic. I'm not even sure that he was Russian, although he spoke my language fluently. He told me nothing about himself in the time I was with him and I was wise enough not to ask. When you are in his sort of business – now my business – you are not defined by who you are but who you are not. If you want to stay ahead of the police and the investigation agencies, you must never leave a trace of yourself behind.

We reached a doorway between two shops in an anonymous street. Rykov unlocked it and we entered a hallway with a narrow, twisting staircase leading up. His flat was on the fourth floor. He unlocked a second door and turned on the light. I found myself in a square, whitewashed room with a high ceiling and exposed beams. It had very little personality and I guessed it was merely somewhere he stayed when he was in Venice rather than a home. The furniture looked new. There was a sofa facing a television, a dining table with

four chairs, and a small kitchen. The pictures on the wall were views of the city, probably the same views you could see if you opened the shutters. It did not feel as if anyone had been here for some time.

“Are you hungry?” Rykov asked.

I shook my head. “No. I’m OK.”

“There are some tins in the cupboard if you want.”

I was hungry. But I was tired too. In fact, I was exhausted as all the suffering of the last three years suddenly drained out of me. It had ended so quickly. I still couldn’t quite accept it. “What happens now?” I asked.

Rykov pointed at a door which I hadn’t noticed, next to the fridge. “There’s only one bedroom here,” he said. “You can sleep on the couch. I have to go out but I’ll be back later. Don’t try to leave here. Do you understand me? You’re to stay in this room. And don’t use the telephone either. If you do, I’ll know.”

“I don’t have anyone to call,” I said. “And I don’t have anywhere to go.”

He nodded. “Good. I’ll get you some blankets before I leave. Help yourself to anything you need.”

A short while later, he left. I drank some water, then made up a bed on the couch and lay down without getting undressed. I was asleep instantly. It was the first time I had slept outside my small wooden cabin in three years.

I didn’t hear Rykov come back but I was woken up by him the following morning as he folded back the shutters and let in the sun. He had changed once again and it took me a few moments to remember who he was. He was wearing a suit and sunglasses. There was a gold chain around his neck. He looked slim and very fit, ten years younger than the mechanic who had come to mend the Bell JetRanger.

“It’s nine o’clock,” he said. “I can’t believe Sharkovsky let you sleep this long. Is that when you started work?”

“No,” I replied. At the *dacha*, I’d woken at six every morning.

“You can use my shower. I’ve left you a fresh shirt. I think it’s your size. Don’t take too long. I want to get some breakfast.”

Ten minutes later, I was washed and dried, wearing a pale blue T-shirt that fitted me well. Rykov took me out and for the first time I saw Venice in the light of an autumn day.

There is simply nowhere in the world like it. Even today, when I am not working, this is somewhere I will come to unwind. I love to sit outside while the sun sets, watching the seagulls circling and the traffic crossing back and forth across the lagoon ... the water taxis, the water ambulances, the classic speedboats, the *vaporettos* and, of course, the gondolas. I can walk for hours through the streets and alleyways that seem to play cat and mouse with the canals, suddenly bringing you to a church, a fountain, a statue, a tiny humpback bridge ... or perhaps depositing you in a great square with bands playing, waiters circling and tourists all around. Every corner has another surprise. Every street is a work of art. I am glad I have never killed anyone there.

Rykov took me to a café around the corner from his flat, an old-fashioned place with a tiled floor, a long counter and a giant-sized coffee machine that blew out clouds of steam. We sat together at a little antique table and he ordered cappuccinos, orange juice and *tramezzini* – little sandwiches, made out of soft bread with smoked ham and cheese. I hadn't eaten for about twenty hours and this was my first taste of Italian food. I wolfed them down and didn't complain when he ordered a second plate. There was a canal running past outside and I was fascinated to see the different boats passing so close to the window.

“So your name is Yassen Gregorovich,” he said. He had been speaking in English ever since we had arrived in Venice. Perhaps he was testing me – although it was more likely that he had decided to leave the Russian language behind ... along with the rest of the character he had been. “How old are you?”

I thought for a moment. “Eighteen,” I said.

“Sharkovsky kidnapped you in Moscow. He kept you his prisoner for three years. You were his food taster. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“You're lucky. We tried to poison him once and we were

considering a second attempt. Your parents are dead?”

“Yes.”

“Arkady Zelin told me about you in the helicopter. And about Sharkovsky. I don’t know why you put up with it so long. Why didn’t you just put a knife into the bastard?”

“Because I wanted to live,” I said. “Karl or Josef would have killed me if I’d tried.”

“You were prepared to spend the rest of your life working for him?”

“I did what I had to to survive. Now he’s dead and I’m here.”

“That’s true.”

Rykov took out a cigarette and lit it. He did not offer me one but nor did I want it. This was the one good thing that had come out of my time at the *dacha*. I had not been allowed to have cigarettes and so I had been forced to give up smoking. I have never smoked since.

“Who are you?” I asked. “And who are Scorpia? Did they pay you to kill Sharkovsky?”

“I’ll give you a piece of advice, Yassen. Don’t ask questions and never mention that name again. Certainly not in public.”

“I’d like to know why I’m here. It would have been easier for you to kill me when we were in Boltino.”

“Don’t think I wasn’t tempted. As it is, it may be that I’ve made a bad mistake. We’ll see.” He drew on the cigarette. “The only reason I didn’t kill you is because I owed you. It was stupid of me not to see the second bodyguard. I don’t usually make mistakes and I’d be dead if it wasn’t for you. But before you get any fancy ideas, we’re quits. The debt is cancelled. From now on, you’re nothing to me. You’re not going to work for me. And I don’t really care whatever happens to you.”

“So why am I here?”

“Because the people I work for want to see you. We’re going there now.”

“There?”

“The Widow’s Palace. We’ll get a boat.”

From the name, I expected somewhere sombre, an old, dark building with black curtains drawn across the windows. But in fact

the Widow's Palace was an astonishing place, like something out of the story books I had read as a child, built out of pink and white bricks with dozens of windows glittering in the sun. There was a covered walkway on the level of the first floor, stretching from one end to the other, held up by slender pillars with archways below. And the palace wasn't standing beside the canal. It was actually sinking into it. The water was lapping at the front door with the white marble steps disappearing below the murky surface.

We pulled in and stepped off the boat. There was a man standing at the entrance with thick shoulders and folded arms, wearing a white shirt and a black suit. He examined us briefly, then nodded for us to continue forward. Already I was regretting this. As I passed from the sunlight to the shadows of the interior, I was thinking of what Zelin had said as he left the helicopter. *You don't know these people. They will kill you.* Maybe three long years of taking orders from Vladimir Sharkovsky had clouded my judgement. I was no longer used to making decisions.

It would have been better if I had run away before breakfast. I could have sneaked on a train to another city. I could have gone to the police for help. I remembered something my grandmother used to say when she was cooking: out of the *latki*, into the fire.

A massive spiral staircase – white marble with wrought-iron banisters – rose up, twisting over itself. Rykov went first and I followed a few steps behind, neither of us speaking. I was nervous but he was completely at ease, one hand in his trouser pocket, taking his time. We came to a corridor lined with paintings: portraits of men and women who must have died centuries before. They stood in their gold frames, watching us pass. We walked down to a pair of doors and before he opened them, Rykov turned and spoke briefly, quietly.

“Say nothing until you are spoken to. Tell the truth. She will know if you're lying.”

She? The widow?

He knocked and without waiting for an answer opened the doors and went through.

The woman who was waiting for us was surely too young to have

married and lost a husband. She couldn't have been more than twenty-six or twenty-seven and my first thought was that she was very beautiful. My second was that she was dangerous. She was quite short, with long, black hair, tied back. It contrasted with the paleness of her skin. She wore no make-up apart from a smear of crimson lipstick that was so bright it was almost cruel. She was dressed in a black silk shirt, open at the neck. A simple gold necklace twisted around her neck. She could have been a model or an actress but there was something that danced in her eyes and told me she was neither.

She was sitting behind a very elegant, ornate table with a line of windows behind her, looking out over the Grand Canal. Two chairs had been placed in front of her and we took our places without waiting to be told. She had not been doing anything when we came in. It was clear that she had simply been waiting for us.

"Mr Grant," she said, and it took me a moment to realize she was talking to Rykov. "How did it go?" Her voice was very young. She spoke English with a strange accent which I couldn't place.

"There was no problem, Mrs Rothman," Rykov – or Grant – replied.

"You killed Sharkovsky?"

"Three bullets. I got into the compound, thanks to the helicopter pilot. He flew me out again. Everything went according to plan."

"Not quite." She smiled and her eyes were bright but I knew something bad was coming and I was right. Slowly she turned to face me as if noticing me for the first time. Her eyes lingered on me. I couldn't tell what was in her mind. "I do not remember asking you to bring me a Russian boy."

Grant shrugged. "He helped me and I brought him here because it seemed the easiest thing to do. It occurred to me that he might be useful to you ... and to Scorpia. He has no background, no family, no identity. He's shown himself to have a certain amount of courage. But if you don't need him, I'll get rid of him for you. And of course there'll be no extra charge."

I had been struggling to follow all this. My teacher, Nigel Brown, had done a good job – my English was very advanced. But still, it was the first time I had heard it spoken by other people, and there were

one or two words I didn't understand. But nor did I need to. I fully understood the offer that Grant had just made and knew that once again my life was in the balance. The worst of it was that there was nothing I could do. I had nothing to say. I'd never be able to fight my way out of this house. I could only sit there and see what this woman decided.

She took her time. I felt her examining me and tried not to show how afraid I was. "That's very generous of you, Mr Grant," she said, at last. "But what gives you the idea that I can't deal with this myself?"

I hadn't seen her lower her hand beneath the surface of the table but when she raised it, she was holding a gun, a silver revolver that had been polished until it shone. She held it almost like a fashion accessory, a perfectly manicured finger curling around the trigger. It was pointing at me and I could see that she was deadly serious. She intended to use it.

I tried to speak. No words came out.

"It's rather a shame," Mrs Rothman went on. "I don't enjoy killing, but you know how it is. Scorpia will not accept a second-rate job." Her hand hadn't moved but her eyes slid back to Grant. "Sharkovsky isn't dead."

"What?" Grant was shocked.

Mrs Rothman moved her arm so that the gun was facing him. She pulled the trigger. Grant was killed instantly, propelled backwards in his chair, crashing onto the floor.

I stared. The noise of the explosion was ringing in my ears. She swung the gun back to me.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" she asked.

"Sharkovsky's dead!" I gasped. It was all I could think to say. "He was shot three times."

"That may well be true. Unfortunately, our intelligence is that he survived. He's in hospital in Moscow. He's critical. But the doctors say he'll pull through."

I didn't know how to react to this information. It seemed impossible. The shots had been fired at close range. I had seen him

thrown off his feet. And yet I had always said he was the devil. Perhaps it would take more than bullets to end his life.

The gun was still pointing at me. I waited for Mrs Rothman to fire again. But suddenly she smiled as if nothing had happened, put the gun down and stood up.

“Would you like a glass of Coke?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Please don’t ask me to repeat myself, Yassen. I find it very boring. We can’t sit and talk here, with a dead body in the room. It isn’t dignified. Let’s go next door.”

She slid out from behind the desk and I followed her through a door that I hadn’t noticed before – it was part of a bookshelf covered with fake books so as not to spoil the pattern. There was a much larger living room behind the door with two plump sofas on either side of a glass table and a massive stone fireplace, though no fire. Fresh flowers had been arranged in a vase and the scent of them hung in the air. Drinks – Coke for me, iced tea for her – had already been served.

We sat down.

“Were you shocked by that, Yassen?” she asked.

I shook my head, not quite daring to speak yet.

“It was very unpleasant but I’m afraid you can’t allow anyone too many chances in our line of work. It sends out the wrong message. This wasn’t the first time Mr Grant had made mistakes. Even bringing you here and not disposing of you when you were in Boltino frankly made me question his judgement. But never mind that now. Here you are and I want to talk about you. I know a little about you but I’d like to hear the rest. Your parents are dead, I understand.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me how it happened. Tell me all of it. See if you can keep it brief, though. I’m only interested in the bare essentials. I have a long day...”

So I told her everything. Right then, I couldn’t think of any reason not to. Estrov, the factory, Moscow, Dima, Demetyev, Sharkovsky ... even I was surprised how my whole life could boil down to so few

words. She listened with what I can only describe as polite interest. You would have thought that some of the things that had happened to me would have caused an expression of concern or sympathy. She really didn't care.

"It's an interesting story," she said, when I had finished. "And you told it very well." She sipped her tea. I noticed that her lipstick left bright red marks on the glass. "The strange thing is that the late Mr Grant was quite right. You could be very useful to us."

"Who are you?" I asked. Then I added, "Scorpia..."

"Ah yes. Scorpia. I'm not entirely sure about the name if you want the truth. The letters stand for Sabotage, Corruption, Intelligence and Assassination, but that's only a few of the things we get up to. They could have added kidnapping, blackmail, terrorism, drug trafficking and vice, but that wouldn't make a word. Anyway, we've got to be called something and I suppose Scorpia has a nice ring to it.

"I'm on the executive board. Right now there are twelve of us. Please don't get the idea that we're monsters. We're not even criminals. In fact, quite a few of us used to work in the intelligence services ... England, France, Israel, Japan ... but it's a fast-changing world and we realized that we could do much better if we went into business for ourselves. You'd be amazed how many governments need to subcontract their dirty work. Think about it. Why risk your own people, spying on your enemies, when you can simply pay us to do it for you? Why start a war when you can pick up the phone and get someone to kill the head of state? It's cheaper. Fewer people get hurt. In a way, Scorpia has been quite helpful when it comes to world peace. We still work for virtually all the intelligence services and that must tell you something about us. A lot of the time we're doing exactly the same jobs that we were doing before. Just at a higher price."

"You were a spy?" I asked.

"Actually, Yassen, I wasn't. I'm from Wales. Do you know where that is? Believe it or not, I was brought up in a tiny mining community. My parents used to sing in the local choir. They're in jail now and I was in an orphanage when I was six years old. My life has

been quite similar to yours in some ways. But as you can see, I've been rather more successful."

It was warm in the room. The sun was streaming in through the windows, dazzling me. I waited for her to continue.

"I'll get straight to the point," she said. "There's something quite special about you, Yassen, even if you probably don't appreciate yourself. Do you see what I'm getting at? You're a survivor, yes. But you're more than that. In your own way, you're unique!

"You see, pretty much everyone in the world is on a databank somewhere. The moment you're born, your details get put into a computer, and computers are getting more and more powerful by the day. Right now I could pick up the telephone and in half an hour I would know anything and everything about anyone you care to name. And it's not just names and that sort of thing. You break into a house and leave a fingerprint or one tiny little piece of DNA and the international police will track you down, no matter where in the world you are. A crime committed in Rio de Janeiro can be solved overnight at Scotland Yard – and, believe me, as the technology changes, it's going to get much, much worse.

"But you're different. The Russian authorities have done you a great favour. They've wiped you out. The village you were brought up in no longer exists. You have no parents. I would imagine that every last piece of information about you and anyone you ever knew in Estrov has been destroyed. And do you know what that's done? It's made you a non-person. From this moment on, you can be completely invisible. You can go anywhere and do anything and nobody will be able to find you."

She reached for her glass, turning it between her finger and her thumb. Her nails were long and sharp. She didn't drink.

"We are always on the lookout for assassins," she said. "Contract killers like Mr Grant. As you have seen, the price of failure in our organization is a high one, but so are the rewards of success. It is a very attractive life. You travel the world. You stay in the best hotels, eat in the best restaurants, shop in Paris and New York. You meet interesting people ... and some of them you kill."

I must have looked alarmed because she raised a hand, stopping me.

“Let me finish. You were brought up by your parents who, I am sure, were good people. So were mine! You are thinking that you could never murder someone for money. You could never be like Mr Grant. But you’re wrong. We will train you. We have a facility not very far from here, an island called Malagosto. We run a school there ... a very special school. If you go there, you will work harder than you have ever worked in your life – even harder than in that *dacha* where you were kept.

“You will be given training in weapons and martial arts. You will learn the techniques of poisoning, shooting, explosives and hand-to-hand combat. We will show you how to pick locks, how to disguise yourself, how to talk your way in and out of any given situation. We will teach you not only how to act like a killer but how to think like one. Every week there will be psychological and physical evaluations. There will also be formal schooling. You need to have maths and science. Your English is excellent but you still speak with a Russian accent. You must lose it. You should also learn Arabic, as we have many operations in the Middle East.

“I can promise you that you will be more exhausted than you would have thought possible but, if you last the course, you will be perfect. The perfect killer. And you will work for us.

“The alternative? You can leave here now. Believe it or not, I really mean it. I won’t stop you. I’ll even give you the money for the train fare if you like. You have nothing. You have nowhere to go. If you tell the police about me, they won’t believe you. My guess is that you will end up back in Russia. Sharkovsky will be looking for you. Without our help, he will find you.

“So there you have it, Yassen. That’s what it comes down to.”

She smiled and finished her drink.

“What do you say?”

OCTPOB

THE ISLAND

They taught me how to kill.

In fact, during the time that I spent on the island of Malagosto, they taught me a great deal more than that. There was no school in the world that was anything like the Training and Assessment Centre that Scorpia had created. How do I begin to describe all the differences? It was, of course, highly secret. Nobody chose to go there ... they chose you. It was surely the only school in the world where there were more teachers than students. There were no holidays, no sports days, no uniforms, no punishments, no visitors, no prizes and no exams. And yet it was, in its own way, a school. You could call it the Eton of murder.

What was strange about Malagosto was how close it was to mainland Venice. Here was this city full of rich tourists drifting between jazz bars and restaurants, five-star hotels and gorgeous *palazzos* – and less than half a mile away, across a strip of dark water, there were activities going on that would have made their hair stand on end. The island had been a plague centre once. There was an old Venetian saying: “Sneeze in Venice and wipe your nose in Malagosto” – the last thing you could afford in a tightly packed medieval city, with its sweating crowds and stinking canals, was an outbreak of the plague. The rich merchants had built a monastery, a hospital, living quarters and a cemetery for the infected. They would house them, look after them, pray for them and bury them. But they would never have them back.

The island was small. I could walk around it in forty minutes. Even in the summer, the sand was a dirty yellow, covered with shingle, and the water was an unappealing grey. All the woodland was tangled together as if it had been hit by a violent storm. There was a clearing in the middle with a few gravestones, the names worn away by time,

leaning together as if whispering the secrets of the past. The monastery had a bell tower made out of dark red bricks and it slanted at a strange angle ... it looked sure to collapse at any moment. The whole building looked dilapidated, half the windows broken, the courtyards pitted with cracks, weeds everywhere.

But the actual truth was quite surprising. Scorpia hadn't just watched the place fall into disrepair, they had helped it on its way. They had removed anything that looked too attractive: fountains, statues, frescoes, stained-glass windows, ornamental doors. They had even gone so far as to insert a hydraulic arm into the tower, deliberately tilting it. The whole point was that Malagosto was not meant to be beautiful. It was off-limits anyway, but they didn't want a single tourist or archaeologist to feel it was worth hiring a boat and risking the crossing. The last time anyone had tried had been six years before, when a group of nuns had taken a ferry from Murano, following in the footsteps of some minor saint. They had still been singing when the ferry had inexplicably blown up. The cause was never found.

Inside, the buildings were much more modern and comfortable than anyone might have guessed. We had two classrooms, warm and soundproof with brand new furniture and banks of audio visual equipment that would have had my old teachers in Rosna staring in envy. All they'd had was chalk and blackboards. There were both indoor and outdoor shooting ranges, a superbly equipped gymnasium with an area devoted exclusively to fighting – judo, karate, kick-boxing and, above all, ninjutsu – and a swimming pool, although most of the time we used the sea. If the temperature was close to freezing, that only made the training more worthwhile. My own rooms, on the second floor of the accommodation block, were very comfortable. I had a bedroom, a living room and even my own bathroom with a huge marble bath that took only seconds to fill, the steaming hot water jetting out of a monster brass tap shaped like a lion's head. I had my own desk, my own TV, a private fridge that was always kept stocked up with bottled water and soft drinks. All this came at a price. Once I left the facility, I would be tied by a five-year

contract working exclusively for Scorpia and the cost of my training would be taken from my salary. This was made clear to me from the start.

After I had met Mrs Rothman and accepted her offer, I was taken straight to the island in the back of a water ambulance. It seemed an odd choice of vessel but of course it would have been completely inconspicuous in the middle of all the other traffic and I did not travel alone. Mr Grant came with me, laid out on a stretcher. I have to say that I felt sorry for him. In his own way he had been kind to me. I turned my thoughts to Vladimir Sharkovsky, probably lying in a Moscow hospital, surrounded by fresh bodyguards watching over him just as the machines would be watching over his heart rate, his blood pressure – all his vital signs. Who would be tasting his food for him now?

It was midday when I arrived.

The water ambulance pulled up to a jetty that was much less dilapidated than it looked and I saw a young woman waiting for me. In fact, from a distance, I had mistaken her for a man. Her dark hair was cut short and she was wearing a loose white shirt, a waistcoat and jeans. But as we drew closer I saw that she was quite attractive, about two or three years older than me, and serious-looking. She wore no make-up. She reached out and gave me a hand off the boat and suddenly we were standing together, weighing each other up.

“I’m Colette,” she said.

“I’m Yassen.”

“Welcome to Malagosto. Do you have any luggage?”

I shook my head. I had brought nothing with me. Apart from what I was wearing, I had no possessions in the world.

“I’ve been asked to show you around. Mr Nye will want to see you later on.”

“Mr Nye?”

“You could say he’s the principal. He runs this place.”

“Are you a teacher?”

She smiled. “No. I’m a student. The same as you. Come on – I’ll start by showing you your rooms.”

I spent the next two hours with Colette. There were only three students there at the time. I would be the fourth. The others were on the mainland, involved in some sort of exercise. As we stood on the beach, looking out across the water, Colette told me a little about them.

“There’s Marat. He’s from Poland. And Sam. He only got here a few weeks ago ... from Israel. Neither of them talks very much but Sam came out of the army. He was going to join Mossad – Israeli intelligence – but Scorpia made him a better offer.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Where have you come from?”

“I’m French.”

We had been speaking in English but I had been aware she had a slight accent. I waited for her to tell me more but she was silent. “Is that all?” I asked.

“What else is there?” You and me ... we’re here. That’s all that matters.”

“How did you get chosen?”

“I didn’t get chosen. I volunteered.” She thought for a moment. “I wouldn’t ask personal questions, if I were you. People can be a bit touchy around here.”

“I just thought it was strange, that’s all. A woman learning how to kill...”

She raised an eyebrow at that. “You are old-fashioned, aren’t you, Yassen! And here’s another piece of advice. Maybe you should keep your opinions to yourself.” She looked at her watch, then drew a thin book out of her back pocket. “Now I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you on your own. I’ve got to finish this.”

I glanced at the cover: MODERN INTERROGATION TECHNIQUES BY DR THREE.

“You might get to meet him one day,” Colette said. “And if you do, be careful what you say. You wouldn’t want to end up as a chapter in his book.”

I spent the rest of the day alone in my room, lying on my bed with all sorts of thoughts going through my head. Much later on, at about eight o’clock in the evening, I was summoned to the headmaster’s

office and it was there that I met the man who was in charge of all the training on Malagosto.

His name was Sefton Nye and my first thought was that he had the darkest skin I had ever seen. His glistening bald head showed off eyes that were extraordinarily large and animated. And he had brilliant white teeth, which he displayed often in an astonishing smile. He dressed very carefully – he liked well-cut blazers, obviously expensive – and his shoes were polished to perfection. He was originally from Somalia. His family were modern-day pirates, holding up luxury yachts, cruise ships and even, on one occasion, an oil tanker that had strayed too close to the shore. They were utterly ruthless... I saw framed newspaper articles in the office describing their exploits. Nye himself had a very loud voice. Everything about him was larger than life.

“Yassen Gregorovich!” he exclaimed, pointing me to a chair in the office, which was almost circular with an iron chandelier in the middle. There were floor to ceiling bookshelves, two windows looking out over woodland, and half a dozen clocks, each one showing a different time. A pair of solid iron filing cabinets stood against one wall. Mr Nye wore the key that opened them around his neck. “Welcome to Malagosto,” he went on. “Welcome indeed. I always take the greatest pleasure in meeting the new recruits because, you see, when you leave here you will not be the same. We are going to turn you into something very special and when I meet you after that, it may well be that I do not want to. You will be dangerous. I will be afraid of you. Everyone who meets you, even without knowing why, will be afraid of you. I hope that thought does not distress you, Yassen, because if it does you should not be here. You are going to become a contract killer and although you will be rich and you will be comfortable, I am telling you now, it is a very lonely path.”

There was a knock at the door and a second man appeared, barely half the height of the headmaster, dressed in a linen suit and brown shoes, with a round face and a small beard. He seemed quite nervous of Mr Nye, his eyes blinking behind his tortoise-shell glasses. “You wanted to see me, headmaster?” he enquired. He had a French accent,

much more distinct than Colette's.

"Ah yes, Oliver!" He gestured in my direction. "This is our newest recruit. His name is Yassen Gregorovich. Mrs Rothman sent him over from the Widow's Palace."

"Delighted." The little man nodded at me.

"This is Oliver d'Arc. He will be your personal tutor and he will also be taking many of your classes. If you're unhappy, if you have any problems, you go to him."

"Thank you," I said, but I had already decided that if I had any problems I would most certainly keep them to myself. This was the sort of place where any weakness would only be used against you.

"I am here for you any time you need me," d'Arc assured me.

I would spend a lot of time with Oliver d'Arc while I was on Malagosto but I never completely trusted him. I don't think I ever knew him. Everything about him – his appearance, the way he spoke, probably even his name – was an act put on for the students' benefit. Later on, after Nye was killed by one of his own students, d'Arc became the headmaster and, by all accounts, he was very good at the job.

"Do you have any questions, Yassen?" Mr Nye asked.

"No, sir," I said.

"That's good. But before you turn in for the night, there's something I want you to do for me, I hope you don't mind. It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours."

That was when I noticed that Oliver d'Arc was holding a spade.

My first job on Malagosto was to bury Mr Grant in the little cemetery in the woods. It was a final resting place that he would share with plague victims who had died four hundred years before him, although I had no doubt that there were other more recent arrivals too, men and women who had failed Scorpia just like him. It was an unpleasant, grisly task, digging on my own in the darkness. Even Sharkovsky had never asked me to do such a thing – but it's possible that it was meant to be a warning to me. Mrs Rothman had let me live. She had even recruited me. But this is what I could look forward to if I let her down.

As I dragged Mr Grant off the stretcher and tipped him into the hole which I had dug, I couldn't help but wonder if someone would do the same for me one day. For what it's worth, it is the only time I have ever had such thoughts. When your business is death, the only death you should never consider is your own. It had begun to rain slightly, a thin drizzle that only made my task more unpleasant. I filled in the grave, flattened it with the spade, then carried the stretcher back to the main complex. Oliver d'Arc was waiting for me with a brandy and a hot chocolate. He escorted me to my room and even insisted on running a bath for me, adding a good measure of "Floris of London" bath oil to the foaming water. I was glad when he finally left. I was afraid he was going to offer to scrub my back.

Five months...

No two days were ever exactly the same, although we were always woken at half past five in the morning for a one-hour run around the island followed by a forty-minute swim – out to a stump of rock and back again. Breakfast was at half past seven, served in a beautiful dining room with a sixteenth-century mosaic on the floor, wooden angels carved around the windows and a faded view of heaven painted on the domed ceiling above our heads. The food was always excellent. All four students ate together and I usually found myself sitting next to Colette. As she had warned me, Marat and Sam weren't exactly unfriendly but they hardly ever spoke to me. Sam was dark and very intense. Marat seemed more laid-back, sitting in class with his legs crossed and his hands behind his back. After they had graduated, they decided to work together as a team and were extremely successful but I never saw them again.

Morning lessons took place in the classrooms. We learned about guns and knives, how to create a booby trap, and how to make a bomb using seven different ingredients that you could find in any supermarket. There was one teacher – he was red-headed, scrawny and had tattoos all over his upper body – who brought in a different weapon for us to practice with every day: not just guns but knives, swords, throwing spikes, ninja fighting fans and even a medieval crossbow ... he actually insisted on firing an apple off Marat's head.

His name was Gordon Ross and he came from a city called Glasgow, in Scotland. He had briefly been assistant to the Chief Armourer at MI6 until Scorpia had tempted him away at five times his original salary.

The first time we met, I impressed him by stripping down an AK-47 machine gun in eighteen seconds. My old friend Leo, of course, would have done it faster. Ross was actually a knife man. His two great heroes were William Fairbairn and Eric Sykes, who together had created the ultimate fighting knife for British commandos during the Second World War. Ross was an expert with throwing knives and he'd had a set specially designed and weighted for his hand. Put him twenty metres from a target and there wasn't a student on the island who could beat him for speed or accuracy, even when he was competing against guns.

Ross also had a fascination with gadgets. He didn't manufacture any himself but he had made a study of the secret weaponry provided by all the different intelligence services and he had managed to steal several items, which he brought in for us to examine. There was a credit card developed by the CIA. One edge was razor-sharp. The French had come up with a string of onions ... several of them were grenades. His own employers, MI6, had provided an antiseptic cream that could eat through metals, a fountain pen that fired a poisoned nib, and a Power Plus battery that concealed a radio transmitter. You simply gave the whole thing a half-twist and it would set off a beacon to summon immediate help. All these devices amused him but at the end of the day he dismissed them as toys. He preferred his knives.

Weapons and self-defence were only part of my training. I was surprised to find myself going back to school in the old-fashioned sense; I learned maths, English, Arabic, science – even classical music, art and cookery. Oliver d'Arc took some of these classes. However, I will not forget the day I was introduced to the unsmiling Italian woman who never told anyone her name but called herself the Countess. It may well be that she was a true aristocrat. She certainly behaved like one, insisting that we stand when she entered and always address her as “ma'am”. She was about fifty, exquisitely

dressed, with expensive jewellery and perfect manners. When she stood up, she expected us to do so too. The Countess took us shopping and to art galleries in Venice. She made us read newspapers and celebrity magazines and often talked about the people in the photographs. At first, I had absolutely no idea what she was doing on the island.

It was only later that I understood. A killer is not just someone who lies on a roof with a 12.7mm sniper rifle, waiting for his prey to walk out of a restaurant. Sometimes it is necessary to be inside that restaurant. To pin down your target, you have to get close to him. You have to wear the right clothes, walk in the right way, demand a good table in a restaurant, understand the food and the wine. How could a boy from a poor Russian village have been able to do any of these things if he had not been taught? I have been to art auctions, to operas, to fashion shows and to horse races. I have sipped champagne with bankers, professors, designers and multimillionaires. I have always felt comfortable and nobody has ever thought I was out of place. For this, I have the Countess to thank.

The toughest part of the day came after lunch. The afternoons were devoted to hand-to-hand combat and three-hour classes were taken either by the headmaster, Mr Nye, or a Japanese instructor, Hatsumi Saburo. We all called him HS and he was an extraordinary man. He must have been seventy years old but he moved faster than a teenager, certainly faster than me. If you weren't concentrating, he would knock you down so hard and so fast that you simply wouldn't be aware of what had happened until you were on the floor, and he would be standing above you, gazing at the ceiling, as if it had been nothing to do with him. Sefton Nye taught judo and karate but it was Hatsumi Saburo who introduced me to a third martial art, ninjutsu, and it is this that has always stayed with me.

Ninjutsu was the fighting method developed by the ninjas, the spies and the assassins who roamed across Japan in the fifteenth century. It was taught to them by the priests and the warriors who were in hiding in the mountains. What I learned from HS over the next five months was what I can only describe as a total fighting system that

encompassed every part of my body including my feet, my knees, my elbows, my fists, my head, even my teeth. And it was more than that. He used to talk about *nagare*, the flow of technique ... knowing when to move from one form of attack to the next. Ultimately, everything came down to mental attitude. "You cannot win if you do not believe you will win," he once said to me. He had a very heavy Japanese accent and barked like a dog. "You must control your emotions. You must control your feelings. If there is any fear or insecurity, you must destroy it before it destroys you. It is not the size or the strength of your opponent that matters. These can be measured. It is what cannot be measured ... courage, determination ... that count."

I felt great reverence for Hatsumi Saburo but I did not like him. Sometimes we would fight each other with wooden swords that were known as *bokken*. He never held back. When I went to bed, my whole body would be black and blue, while I would never so much as touch him. "You have too many emotions, Yas-sen!" he would crow, as he stood over me. "All that sadness. All that anger. It is the smoke that gets into your eyes. If you do not blow it away how can you hope to see?"

Was I sad about what had happened to me? Was I angry? I suppose Scorpia would know better than me because, just as Mrs Rothman had promised, I was given regular psychological examinations by a doctor called Karl Steiner who came from South Africa. I disliked him from the start; the way he looked at me, his eyes always boring into mine as if he suspected that everything I said was a lie. I don't think I ever heard Dr Steiner say anything that wasn't a question. He was a very neat man, always dressed in a suit with a carnation in his lapel. He would sit there with one leg crossed over the other, occasionally glancing at a gold pocket watch to check the time. His office was completely bare ... just a white space with two armchairs. It had a window that looked out over the firing range and I would sometimes hear the crack of the rifles outside as he fired his own questions my way.

I regretted now that I had told Mrs Rothman so much about myself. She had passed all the information to him and he wanted me to talk

about my parents, my grandmother, my childhood in Estrov. The more we talked, the less I wanted to say. I felt empty, as if the life I was describing was something that no longer belonged to me. And the strange thing is, I think that was exactly what he wanted. In his own way he was just like Hatsumi Saburo. My old life was smoke. It had to be blown away.

We were given a couple of hours of rest before dinner but we were always expected to use the time productively. My tutor, Oliver d'Arc, insisted that I read books ... and in English, not Russian. Some evenings we had political discussions. I learned more about my own country while I was on the island than I had the whole time I was living there.

We also had guest lecturers. They were brought to Malagosto in blindfolds and many of them had been in prison but they were all experts in their own field. One was a pickpocket ... he shook hands with each one of us before he began and then started his lecture by returning our watches. Another showed us how to pick locks. There was one really brilliant lecture by an elderly Hungarian man with terrible scars down the side of his face. He had lost his sight in a car accident. He talked to us for two hours about disguise and false identities, and then revealed that he was actually a thirty-two-year-old Belgian woman and that she could see as well as any of us.

You never knew what was going to happen. The school loved to throw surprises our way. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, a whistle would blow and we would find ourselves called out to the assault course, crawling through the rain and the mud, climbing nets and swinging on ropes while Mr Ross fired live ammunition at our heels. Once, we were told to swim to the mainland, to steal clothes and money when we got there and then to make our own way back.

But Scorpia did not want us to become too cut off, too removed from the real world. As well as the expeditions with the Countess, they often gave us half a day off to visit Venice. Marat and Sam kept themselves to themselves so I usually found myself with Colette. We would go to the markets together and walk the streets. She was always stopping to take photographs. She loved little details ... an

iron door handle, a gargoyle, a cat asleep on a windowsill. I had never been out with a girl before – I had never really had the chance – and I found myself being drawn to her in a way I could not completely understand. All the time, I was being taught to hide my feelings. When I was with her, I wanted to do the opposite.

She never told me much more about herself than she had that first time we had met and I was sensible enough not to ask. She let slip that she had once lived in Paris, that her father was something to do with the French government and that she hadn't spoken to him for years. She had left home when she was very young and had somehow survived on her own since then. She never explained how she had found out about Scorpia. But I did learn that her training would be over very soon. Like all recruits, she was going to be sent on her first solo kill – a real job with a real target.

“Do you ever think about it?” I asked her.

We were sitting outside a café on the Riva degli Schiavoni with a great expanse of water in front of us and hundreds of tourists streaming past. They gave us privacy.

“What?” she asked.

I lowered my voice. “Killing. Taking another person's life.”

She looked at me over the top of her coffee. She was wearing sunglasses which hid her eyes but I could tell she was annoyed. “You should ask Dr Steiner about that.”

I held her gaze. “I'm asking you.”

“Why do you even want to know?” she snapped. She stirred the coffee. It was very black, served in a tiny cup. “It's a job. There are all sorts of people who don't deserve to live. Rich people. Powerful people. Take one of them out, maybe you're doing the world a favour.”

“What if they're married?”

“Who cares?”

“What if they have children?”

“If you think like that, you shouldn't be here. You shouldn't even be talking like this. If you were to say any of this to Marat or Sam, they'd go straight to Mr Nye.”

“I wouldn’t talk to them,” I said. “They’re not my friends.”

“And you think I am?”

I still remember that moment. Colette was leaning towards me and she was wearing a jacket with a very soft, close-fitting jersey beneath. She took off her sunglasses and looked at me with brown eyes that, I’m sure, had more warmth in them than she intended. Right then, I wished that we could be just like all the other people strolling by us; a Russian boy and a French girl who had just happened to bump into each other in one of the most romantic places on the earth. But of course it couldn’t be. It would never be.

“I’m not your friend,” she said. “We’ll never have friends, Yassen. Either of us.”

She finished her coffee, stood up and walked away.

Colette left a few weeks later and after that there were just the three of us continuing with the training, day and night.

None of the instructors ever said as much but I knew I was doing well. I was the fastest across the assault course. On the shooting range, my targets always came whirring back with the bullets grouped neatly inside the head. I had mastered all sixteen body strikes – the so-called “secret fists” – that are essential to ninjutsu and during one memorable training session I even managed to land a blow on HS. I could see the old man was pleased ... although he flattened me half a second later. After hours in the gym, I was in peak physical condition. I could run six times around the island and I wouldn’t be out of breath.

And yet I couldn’t forget what I had talked about with Colette. When I fired at a target, I would always imagine a real human being and not the cut-out soldier with his fixed, snarling face in front of me. Instead of the quick snap, the little round hole that appeared in the paper as the bullet passed through, there would be the explosion of bone fragmenting, blood splashing out. The paper soldier’s eyes ignored me. He felt nothing. But what would a man be thinking as he died? He would never see his family again. He would never feel the warmth of the sun. Everything that he had and everything he was would have been stolen away by me. Could I really do that to

someone and not hate myself for ever?

I had not chosen this. There was a time when I'd thought I was going to work in a factory making pesticides. I was going to live in a village that nobody had ever heard of, dreaming of being a helicopter pilot, pinning pictures to the wall. Looking back, it felt as if some evil force had been manipulating me every inch of the way to bring me here. From the moment my parents had been killed, my own life had no longer been mine to control. And yet, it occurred to me, it was still not too late. Scorpia had taught me how to fight, how to change my identity, how to hide and how to survive. Once I left Malagosto, I could use these skills to escape from them. I could steal money and go anywhere in the world that I wanted, change my name, begin a new life. Lying in bed at night, I would think about this but at the same time I knew, with a sense of despair, that I was wrong. Scorpia was too powerful. No matter how far I ran, eventually they would find me and there was no escaping what the result would be. I would die young. But wasn't that better than becoming what they wanted? At least I would have stayed true to myself.

I was terrified of giving any of this away while with Dr Steiner. I always thought before I answered any of his questions and tried to tell him what he wanted to hear, not what I really thought. I was afraid that if he caught sight of my weakness, my training would be cancelled and the next recruit would end up burying me in the woods. The secret was to be completely emotionless. Sometimes he showed me horrible pictures – scenes of war and violence. I tried not to look at the dead and mutilated bodies, but then he would ask me questions about them and I would find myself having to describe everything in detail, trying to keep the quiver out of my voice. And yet I thought I was getting away with it. At the end of each session, he would take my hand – cupping it in both of his own – and purr at me, “Well done, Yassen. That was very, very good.” As far as I could tell, he had no idea at all what was really going on in my head.

And then, at last, the day came when Oliver d'Arc called me to his study. As I entered, he was tuning the cello, which was an instrument he played occasionally. The room was a mess, with books everywhere

and papers spilling out of drawers. It smelled of tobacco, although I never saw him smoke.

“Ah, Yassen!” he exclaimed. “I’m afraid you’re going to miss evening training. Mrs Rothman is back in Venice. You’re to have dinner with her. Make sure you wear your best clothes. A launch will pick you up at seven o’clock.”

When I had first come to the island, I might have asked why she wanted to see me but by now I knew that I would always be given all the information I needed, and to ask for more was only to show weakness.

“It looks like you’re going to be leaving us,” he went on.

“My training is finished?”

“Yes.”

He plucked one of the strings. “You’ve done very well, my dear boy,” he said. “And I must say, I’ve thoroughly enjoyed tutoring you. And now your moment has come. Good luck!”

From this, I understood that my final test had arrived ... the solo kill. My training was over. My life as an assassin was about to begin.

And that night, I met Mrs Rothman for the second time. She had sent her personal launch to collect me, a beautiful vessel that was all teak and chrome with a silver scorpion moulded into the bow. It carried me beneath the famous Bridge of Sighs – I hoped that was not an omen – and on to the Widow’s Palace where we had first met. She was dressed, once again, in black; this time a very low-cut dress with a zip down one side, which I recognized at once as the work of the designer, Gianni Versace. We ate in her private dining room at a long table lit by candles and surrounded by paintings – Picasso, Cézanne, Van Gogh – all of them worth millions. We began with soup, then lobster, and finally a creamy custard mixed with wine that the Italians call *zabaglione*. The food was delicious but as I ate I was aware of her examining me, watching every mouthful, and I knew that I was still being tested.

“I’m very pleased with you, Yassen,” she said as the coffee was poured. The whole meal had been served by two men in white jackets and black trousers, her personal waiters. “Do you think you’re

ready?”

“Yes, Mrs Rothman,” I replied.

“You can stop calling me that now.” She smiled at me and I was once again struck by her film-star looks. “I prefer Julia.”

There was a file on the table beside her. It hadn’t been there when we started. One of the waiters had brought it in with the coffee. She opened it. First she took out a printed report.

“You’re naturally gifted ... an excellent marksman. Hatsumi Saburo speaks very highly of your abilities. I see also that you have learned from the Countess. Your manners are faultless. Six months ago you wouldn’t have been able to sit at a table like this without giving yourself away, but you are very different from the street urchin I met back then.”

I nodded but said nothing. Another lesson. Never show gratitude unless you hope to gain something from it.

“But now we must see if you can actually put into practice everything that we have taught you in theory.” She took out a passport and slid it across the table. “This is yours,” she said. “We have kept your family name. There was no reason not to, particularly as your first name had changed anyway. Yassen Gregorovich is what you are now and will always be ... unless of course we feel the need for you to travel under cover.” An envelope followed. “You’ll find the details of your bank account inside,” she said. “You are a client of the European Finance Group. It’s a private bank based in Geneva. There are fifty thousand American dollars, fifty thousand euros and fifty thousand pounds in the account, and no matter how much you spend, these figures will always remain the same. Of course, we will be watching your expenses.”

She was enjoying this, sending me out for the first time, almost challenging me to show reluctance or any sign of fear. She took out a second envelope, thicker than the first. This one was sealed with a strip of black tape. There was a scorpion symbol stamped in the middle.

“This envelope contains a return air ticket to New York, which is where your first assignment will take place. There is another

thousand dollars in here too ... petty cash to get you started. You are flying economy.”

That didn't surprise me. I was young and I was entering the United States on my own. Travelling business or first class might draw attention to myself.

“You will be met at the airport and taken to your hotel. You will report back to me here in Venice in one week's time. Do you want to know who you are going to kill?”

“I'm sure you'll tell me when you want to,” I said.

“That's right.” She smiled. “You'll get all the information that you need once you arrive. A weapon will also be delivered to you. Is that all understood?”

“Yes,” I said. Of course I had questions. Above all I wanted a name and a face somewhere; on the other side of the world, a man was going about his business with no knowledge that I was on my way. What had he done to anger Scorpia? Why did he have to lose his life? But I stayed silent. I was being very careful not to show any sign of weakness.

“Then I think our evening is almost over,” Mrs Rothman said. She reached out and, just for a moment, her fingers brushed against the back of my hand. “You know, Yassen,” she said, “you are incredibly good-looking. I thought that the moment I saw you and your five months on Malagosto have done nothing but improve you.” She sighed and drew her hand away. “Russian boys aren't quite my thing,” she continued. “Or else who knows what we might get up to? But it will certainly help you in your work. Death should always come smartly dressed.”

She got up, as if about to leave. But then she had second thoughts and turned back to me. “You were fond of that girl, Colette, weren't you?”

“We spent a bit of time together,” I said. “We came into Venice once or twice.” Julia Rothman would know that, anyway.

“Yes,” she murmured. “I had a feeling the two of you would hit it off.”

She was daring me to ask. So I did.

“How is she?”

“She’s dead.” Mrs Rothman brushed some imaginary dust from the sleeve of her dress. “Her first assignment went very wrong. It wasn’t entirely her fault. She took out the target but she was shot by the Argentinian police.”

And that was when I knew what she had done to me. That was when I knew exactly what Scorpia had made me.

I felt nothing. I said nothing. If I was sad, I didn’t show it. I simply watched impassively as she left the room.

НЬЮ-ЙОРК

NEW YORK

I had never spent so long in an aeroplane.

Nine hours in the air! I found the entire experience fascinating; the size of the plane, the number of people crammed together, the unpleasant food served in plastic trays, night and day refusing to behave as they should outside the small, round windows. I also experienced jet lag for the first time. It was a strange sensation, like being dragged backwards down a hill. But I was in excellent shape. I was full of excitement about my mission. I was able to fight it off.

I was entering the United States under my own name and with a cover story that Scorpia had supplied. I was a student on a scholarship from Moscow State University, studying American literature. I was here to attend a series of lectures on famous American writers being given at the New York Public Library. The lectures really were taking place. I carried with me a letter of introduction from my professor, a copy of my thesis and an NYPL programme. I would be staying with my uncle and aunt, a Mr and Mrs Kirov, who had an apartment in Brooklyn. I also had a letter from them.

I joined the long queue in the immigration hall and watched the uniformed men and women in their booths stamping the passports of the people in front of me. At last it was my turn. I was annoyed to feel my heart was thumping as I found myself facing a scowling black officer who seemed suspicious of me before I had even opened my mouth.

“What’s your business in the United States?” he asked.

“I’m studying American literature. I’m here to attend some lectures.”

“How long are you staying...?” He squinted at my name in the passport. “...Yassen?”

“One week.”

I thought that would be it. I was waiting for him to pick up the stamp and allow me in. Instead, he suddenly asked, “So how do you like Scott Fitzgerald?”

I knew the name. F. Scott Fitzgerald had been one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century. “I really enjoyed *The Great Gatsby*,” I said. “I think it’s his best book. Although his next one, *Tender is the Night*, was fantastic too.”

He nodded. “Enjoy your stay.”

The stamp came down. I was in.

I had one suitcase with me. Both the suitcase and all the clothes inside it had been purchased in Moscow. Of course I carried no weapon. It might have been possible to conceal a pistol somewhere in my luggage but it wasn’t a risk worth taking. Thanks to America’s absurd gun laws, it would be much easier to arm myself once I arrived. I waited by the luggage carousel until my case arrived. I knew at once that nobody had looked inside the case either at Rome Airport or here. If the police or airport authorities had opened one of the catches, they would have broken an electrical circuit which ran through the handle. There was a blue luggage tag attached and it would change colour, giving me advance warning of what had happened. The tag was still blue. I grabbed the case and went out.

My contact was waiting for me in the arrivals hall, holding up my name on a piece of white card. He looked like all the other limo drivers: tired and uninterested, dressed in a suit with a white shirt and sunglasses, even though it was early evening and there was little sign of the sun. He had misspelt my name. The card read: YASSEN GREGORIVICH. This was not a mistake. It was an agreed signal between the two of us. It told me that he was who he said he was and that it was safe for us to meet.

He did not tell me his name. Nor did I ask. I doubted that the two of us would meet again. We walked to the car park – or the parking garage as the Americans called it – without speaking. He had parked his car, a black Daimler, close to the exit and held the door open for me as I slid into the back seat. He climbed into the front, then handed

me another envelope. This one was also marked with a scorpion.

“You’ll find your instructions inside,” he said. “You can read them in the car. The drive is about forty minutes. I’m taking you to the SoHo Plaza Hotel, where a room has been reserved in your name. You are to stay there this evening. There’ll be a delivery at exactly ten o’clock. The man will knock three times and will introduce himself as Marcus. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. There’s a bottle of water in the side pocket if you need it...”

He started the engine and a moment later, we set off.

Nothing quite prepares you for the view of New York as you come over the Brooklyn Bridge; the twinkling lights behind thousands and thousands of windows, the skyscrapers presenting themselves to you like toys in a shop window, so much life crammed into so little space. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Rockefeller Centre, the Beekman, the Waldorf-Astoria ... your eye travels from one to the other but all too soon you’re overwhelmed. You cannot separate them. They merge together to become one island, one city. Every time you return you will be amazed. But the first time you will never forget.

I saw none of it. Of course I looked out as I was carried over the East River but I couldn’t believe I was really there. It was as if I was sitting in some sort of prison and the tinted glass of the car window was a silent television screen that I was glimpsing out of the corner of my eye. If you had told me, a year ago, that I would one day arrive here in a chauffeur-driven car, I would have laughed in your face. But the view meant nothing. I had torn open the envelope. I had taken out a few sheets of paper and two photographs. I was looking at the face of the person I had come to kill. My first thoughts had been wrong. My target was not a man.

Her name was Kathryn Davis and she was a lawyer, a senior partner in a firm called Clarke Davenport based on Fifth Avenue. I suspected that the address was an expensive one. The first photograph was in black and white and had been taken as she stood beside a traffic light. She was a serious-looking woman with a square face and light brown

hair cut in a fringe. I would have guessed she was in her mid-thirties. She was wearing glasses that only made her look more severe. There was something quite bullish about her. I could easily imagine her tearing someone apart in court. In the second photograph she was smiling. This one was in colour and generally she was more relaxed, waving at someone who was not in the shot. I wondered which Kathryn Davis I would meet. Which one would be easier to kill?

There was a newspaper article attached:

NY LAWYER THREATENED

In Red Knot Valley, Nevada, she's a heroine – but New York lawyer Kathryn Davis claims she has received death threats in Manhattan, where she lives and works.

Ms Davis represents two hundred and twelve residents of the Red Knot community, who have come together in a class action against the multinational Pacific Ridge Mining Company. They claim that millions of tonnes of mining waste have seeped into their ecosystem, killing their fish, poisoning their crops and causing widespread flooding. Pacific Ridge, which has denied the claim, owns several “open pit” gold mines in the area and when traces of arsenic were found in the food chain, local people were quick to cry foul. It has taken 37-year-old Kathryn Davis two years to gather her evidence but she believes that her clients will be awarded damages in excess of one billion dollars when the case comes to court next month.

“It's not been an easy journey,” says mother-of-two Ms Davis. “My telephone has been bugged. I have been followed in the street. I have received hate mail that makes threats against me and which I have passed to the police. But I am not going to let myself be intimidated. What happened in Red Knot is a national scandal and I am determined to get to the truth.”

I had also been supplied with the woman's home address – which was in West 85th Street – and a photograph of her house, a handsome building that looked out over a tree-lined street. According to her biography, she was married to a doctor. She had two children and a dog, a spaniel. She was a member of several clubs and a gym. There was a blank card at the bottom of the envelope. It contained just four words:

MUGGING. BEFORE THE WEEKEND.

It is embarrassing to remember this but I did not understand the word ‘mugging’ – I had simply never come across it – and I spent the rest of the journey worrying that the driver or Marcus would discover that I had no idea what I was meant to do. I looked up the word the next day in a bookshop and realized that Scorpia wanted this to look like a street crime. As well as killing her, I would steal money from her. That way there would be no connection with Scorpia or the gold mines at Pacific Ridge.

The driver barely spoke to me again. He pulled up in front of an old-fashioned hotel, where there were porters waiting to lift out my case and help carry it into reception. I showed my passport and handed over the credit card I had been given.

“You have a room for four nights, Mr Gregorovich,” the receptionist confirmed. That would take me to Saturday. My plane back to Italy left John F. Kennedy Airport at eleven o’clock in the morning that day.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re in room 605 on the sixth floor. Have a nice day.”

During my training, Oliver d’Arc had told me the story of an Israeli agent working under cover in Dubai. He had got into a lift with seven people. One of them had been his best friend. The others were an elderly French woman who was staying at the hotel, a blind man, a young honeymooning couple, a woman in a burka and a chambermaid. The lift doors had closed and that was the moment when he discovered that all of them – including his friend – were working for al-Qaeda. When the lift doors opened again, he was dead. I took the stairs to my floor and waited for my case to be brought up.

The room was small, clean, functional. I sat on the bed until the case came, tipped the porter and unpacked. Before I left Malagosto, Gordon Ross had supplied me with a couple of the items which he had shown us during our lessons and which he hoped would help me with my work. The first of these was a travelling alarm clock. I took it

out of my suitcase and flicked a switch concealed in the back. It scanned the entire room, searching for electromagnetic signals ... in other words, bugs. There weren't any. The room was clean. Next, I took out a small tape recorder, which I stuck to the back of the fridge. When I left the room, it would record anyone who came in.

At ten o'clock exactly, there were three knocks on the door. I went over and opened it to find an elderly, grey-haired man, smartly dressed in a suit with a coat hanging open. He had a neat beard, also grey. If you had met him in the street you might have thought he was a professor or perhaps an official in a foreign embassy.

"Mr Gregorovich?" he asked.

It was all so strange. I was still getting used to being called "Mr". I nodded. "You're Marcus?"

He didn't answer that. "This is for you," he said, handing me a parcel, wrapped in brown paper. "I'll call back tomorrow night at the same time. By then, I hope, you'll have everything planned out. OK?"

"Right," I said.

"Nice meeting you."

He left. I took the parcel over to the bed and opened it. The size and weight had already told me what I was going to find inside and, sure enough, there it was – a Smith & Wesson 4546, an ugly but efficient semi-automatic pistol that looked old and well used. The serial number had been filed off, making it impossible to trace. I checked the clip. It had been delivered with six bullets. So there it was. I had the target. I had the weapon. And I had just four days to make the kill.

The following morning, I stood outside the offices of Clarke Davenport, which were located on the nineteenth floor of a skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan, quite close to the huge, white marble structure of St Patrick's Cathedral. This was quite useful to me. A church is one of the few places in a city where it is possible to linger without looking out of place. From the steps, I was able to examine the building opposite at leisure, watching the people streaming in and out of the three revolving doors, wondering if I might catch sight of Kathryn Davis among them. I was glad she did

not appear. I was not sure if I was ready for this yet. Part of me was worried that I never would be.

The secret of a successful kill is to know your target. That was what I had been taught. You have to learn their movements, their daily routine, the restaurants where they eat, the friends they meet, their tastes, their weaknesses, their secrets. The more you know, the easier it will be to find a time and an opportunity and the less chance there will be of making a mistake. You might not think I would learn a great deal from staring at a building for five hours, but at the end of that time I felt myself connected to it. I had taken note of the CCTV cameras. I had counted how many policemen had walked past on patrol. I had seen the maintenance men go in and had noted which company they worked for.

At half past five that afternoon, just as the rush to get home had begun and when everyone would be at their most tired and impatient, I presented myself at the main reception desk, wearing the overalls of an engineer from Bedford (Long Island) Electricity. I had visited the company earlier that afternoon – it was actually in Brooklyn – pretending that I was looking for a job and it had been simple enough to steal a uniform and an assortment of documents. I had then returned to my hotel, where I had manufactured an ID tag using a square cut out from a company newsletter and a picture of myself, which I had taken in a photo booth. The whole thing was contained in a plastic holder, which I had deliberately scratched and made dirty so that it would be difficult to see. Maintaining a false identity is mainly about mental attitude. You simply have to believe you are who you say you are. You can show someone a travel card and they will accept it as police ID if you do it with enough authority. Another lesson from Malagosto.

The receptionist was a very plump woman with her eye already fixed on the oversized clock that was built into the wall opposite her. There was a security man, in uniform, standing nearby.

“BLI Electrics,” I said. I spoke with a New York accent, which had taken me many hours, working with tapes, to acquire. “We’ve got a heating unit down...” I pretended to consult my worksheet. “Clarke

Davenport.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” the woman said.

“That’s right, ma’am.” I showed her my pass, at the same time holding her eye so she wouldn’t look at it too closely. “It’s my first week in the job. *And* it’s my first job,” I added proudly. “I only graduated this summer.”

She smiled at me. I guessed that she had children of her own. “It’s the nineteenth floor,” she said.

The security man even called the lift for me.

I took it as far as the eighteenth floor, then got out and made my way to the stairwell. It was still too early and I had a feeling lawyers wouldn’t keep normal office hours. I waited an hour, listening to the sounds in the building ... people saying goodbye to each other, the chimes of the lifts as the doors opened and shut. It was dark by now and with a bit of luck the building would be empty apart from the cleaners. I walked up one floor and found myself in the reception area of Clarke Davenport with two silver letters – C and D – on the wall. There was no one there. The lights were burning low. A pair of frosted glass doors opened onto a long corridor, a length of plush blue carpet leading clients past conference rooms with leather chairs and tables polished like mirrors. My feet made no sound as I made my way through an open-plan area filled with desks, computers and photocopying machines, but as I reached the far end I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye and suddenly I was being challenged.

“Can I help you?”

I hadn’t seen the young, tired-looking woman who had been bending down beside a filing cabinet. She was wearing a coat and scarf, about to leave, but she hadn’t gone yet and I had allowed her to see me. My heart sank at such carelessness. I could almost hear Sefton Nye shouting at me.

“The water cooler,” I muttered, pointing down the corridor.

“Oh. Sure.” She had found the file she was looking for and straightened up.

I continued walking. With a bit of luck, she wouldn’t even

remember we'd met.

All the offices at Clarke Davenport had the names of their occupants printed next to the doors. That was helpful. Kathryn Davis was at the far end. She must have been important to the company as she had been given a corner office with views over Fifth Avenue and the cathedral. The door was locked but that was no longer a problem for me. Using a pick and a tension wrench I had it open in five seconds and let myself into a typical lawyer's office with an antique desk, two chairs facing it, a shelf full of books, a leather sofa with a coffee table and various pictures of mountain scenery. I turned on her desk lamp. It might have been safer to use a torch but I didn't intend to stay here long and having proper light would make everything easier.

I went straight to the desk. There was a framed photograph of the woman with her two children, a girl and a boy, aged about fourteen and twelve. They were all wearing hiking gear. There was nothing of any interest in her drawers. I opened her diary. She had client meetings all week, lunches booked in the following day and on Friday some sort of evening engagement. The entry read:

MET 7.00 p.m.

D home

I quickly checked out the rest of the room. All the books were about law except for two on the coffee table which contained reproductions of famous paintings. She also had a catalogue from an auction house ... a sale of modern art. Briefly, I brushed my fingers over the sofa, trying to get a sense of the woman who might have sat on it. But the truth was that the office told me only so much about Kathryn Davis. It had been designed that way, to present a serious, professional image to the clients who came here but nothing more.

Even so, I had got what I had come for. I knew when and where the killing would take place.

I was back in my hotel room and at exactly ten o'clock there was a knock at the door. The man who called himself Marcus had returned. This time he came in.

"Well?" He waited for me to speak.

"Friday night," I said. "Central Park."

It hadn't taken me long to work out the diary entry, even without a detailed knowledge of the city. The art books on the table had been the clue. MET obviously meant the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a New York landmark. I had already telephoned them and discovered that there was indeed a private function at the museum that night for the American Bar Association ... Kathryn Davis would certainly be a member. The D in the diary was her husband, David. He was going to be home, babysitting. She would be there on her own.

I explained this to Marcus. His face gave nothing away but he seemed to approve of the idea. "You're going to shoot her in the park?" he asked. "How do you know she won't take a cab?"

"She likes walking," I said. The hiking gear and the mountain photographs had told me that. "And look at the map. She lives in West 85th Street. That's just a ten-minute stroll across the park."

"What if it's raining?"

"Then I'll have to do it when she comes out. But I've looked at the forecast and it's going to be unusually warm and dry."

“You’re lucky. This time last year it was snowing.” Marcus nodded. “All right. It sounds as if you’ve got it all worked out. If things go according to plan, you won’t see me again. Throw the gun into the Hudson. Make sure you’re on that Saturday plane. Good luck.”

You should never rely on luck. Nine times out of ten it will be your enemy and if you need it, it means you’ve been careless with your planning.

I was back outside St Patrick’s Cathedral the next day and this time I did glimpse Kathryn Davis as she got out of a taxi and went into the building. She was shorter than I had guessed from her photographs. She was wearing a smart, beige-coloured overcoat and carried a leather briefcase so full of files that she wasn’t able to close it. Seeing her jolted me in a strange way. I wasn’t afraid. It seemed to me that Scorpia had deliberately chosen an easy target for my first assignment. But somehow the stakes had been raised. I began to think about what I was going to do, about taking the life of a person I had never met and who meant nothing to me. Today was Thursday. By the end of the week, my life would have changed and nothing would ever be the same again. I would be a killer. After that, there could be no going back.

The days passed in a blur. New York was such an amazing city with its soaring architecture, the noise and the traffic, the shop windows filled with treasures, the steam rising out of the streets ... I wish I could say I enjoyed my time there. But all I could think about was the job, the moment of truth that was getting closer and closer. I continued to make preparations. I examined the house in West 85th Street. I saw where the children went to school. I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and found the room where the private function would take place, checking out all the entrances and exits. I bought a silicone cloth and some degreaser, stripped the gun down and made sure it was in perfect working order. I meditated, using methods I had learned on Malagosto, keeping my stress levels down.

Friday evening was warm and dry, just as the weather office had predicted. I was standing outside the office on Fifth Avenue when Kathryn Davis left and I saw her hail a cab. That didn’t surprise me. It

was six forty-five and her destination was thirty blocks away. I hailed a second cab and followed. It took us twenty minutes to weave our way through the traffic, and when we arrived there were crowds of smartly dressed people making their way in through the front entrance of the museum. Somehow we had managed to overtake the taxi carrying Kathryn Davis and it took me a few anxious moments to find her again. She had just met a woman she knew and the two of them were kissing in the manner of two professionals rather than close friends, not actually touching each other.

As I stood watching, the two of them went in together. I very much hoped that the women would not leave together too. It had always been my assumption that Kathryn Davis would walk home alone. What if her friend offered to accompany her? What if there was a whole group of them? I could see now that I had made a mistake leaving the killing until my last evening in New York. I had to be on a plane at eleven o'clock the following morning. If anything went wrong tonight, there could be no backup. I wouldn't get a second chance.

It was too late to worry about that now. There was a long plaza in front of the museum with an ornamental pool and three sets of steps running up to the main door. I found a place in the shadows and waited there while more taxis and limousines arrived and the guests went in. I could hear piano music playing inside.

Nobody saw me. I was wearing a dark coat, which I had bought in a thrift shop and which was one size too large for me. I had chosen it for the pockets, which were big enough to conceal both the gun and my hand which was curved around it. It was an easy draw – I had already checked. I would get rid of the coat at the same time as the gun. I was very calm. I knew exactly what I was going to do. I had played out the scene in my mind. I didn't let it trouble me.

At nine-thirty, the guests began to leave. She was one of the first of them, talking to the same woman she had met when she had arrived. It seemed that they were going to set off together. Did it really matter, the death of two women instead of one? I was about to embark on a life where dozens, maybe hundreds of men and women

would die because of me. There would always be innocent bystanders. There would be policemen – and policewomen – who might try to stop me. I could almost hear Oliver d’Arc talking to me.

The moment you start worrying about them, the moment you question what you are doing – goodbye, Yassen! You’re dead!

I put my hand in my pocket and found the gun. One woman. Two women. It made no difference at all.

In fact, Kathryn Davis walked off on her own. She said something to her friend, then turned and left. Just as I had expected, she went round the side of the museum and into Central Park. I followed.

Almost at once we were on our own, cut off from the traffic on Fifth Avenue, the other guests searching for their cars and taxis. The way ahead was clear. Light was spilling out from a huge conservatory at the back of the museum, throwing dark green shadows between the shrubs and trees. We crossed a smaller road – this one closed to traffic – that ran through the park. Over to the left, a stone obelisk rose up in a clearing. It was called Cleopatra’s Needle. I had stood in front of it that afternoon. A couple of joggers ran past, two young men in tracksuits, their Nike trainers hitting the track in unison. I turned away, making sure they didn’t see my face. The moon had come out, pale and listless. It didn’t add much light to the scene. It was more like a distant witness.

Kathryn Davis had taken one of the paths that circled the softball fields with a large pond on her left. She knew exactly where she was going, as if she had done this walk often. I was about ten paces behind her, slowly catching up, trying to pretend that I had nothing to do with her. We were already halfway across. I was beginning to hear the traffic noise on the other side. And then, quite suddenly, she turned round and looked at me. I would not say that she was scared but she was aggressive. She was using her body language to assert herself, to tell me that she wasn’t afraid of me. There was an electric lamp nearby and it reflected in her glasses.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Are you following me?”

The two of us were quite alone. The joggers had gone. There were no other walkers anywhere near. What she had done was really quite

stupid. If she had become aware of me, which she clearly had, she would have done better to increase her pace, to reach the safety of the streets. Instead, she had signed her death warrant. I could shoot her here and now. We were less than ten paces apart.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

I was trying to take out the gun. But I couldn't. It was just like when I had played Russian roulette with Vladimir Sharkovsky. My hand wouldn't obey me. I felt sick. I had planned everything so carefully, every last detail. In the last four days, I had done nothing else. But all the time, I had ignored my own feelings and it was only now, here, that I realized the truth. I was not, after all, a killer. This woman was about the same age as my own mother. She had two children of her own. If I shot her down, simply for money, what sort of monster would that make me?

If you don't kill her, Scorpia will kill you, a voice whispered in my ear.

Let them, I replied. *It would be better to be dead than to become what they want.*

“Who are you?” Kathryn Davis asked.

“I'm no one,” I said. I took my hands out of my coat pockets, showing that they were empty. “I was just walking.”

She relaxed a little. “Well, maybe you should keep your distance.”

“Sure. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.”

“Yeah – OK.”

She stood there, watching me, waiting for me to go. I quickly walked past her, then turned off in another direction.

I didn't look back. Inside, I felt glad. That was the simple truth. I was happy that she was still alive. I was aware of a sense of huge relief, as if I had just fought a battle with myself and won. I saw now that from the moment I had climbed into the helicopter with Rykov – or Mr Grant – I had been sinking into some sort of mental quicksand. Mrs Rothman in Venice. Sefton Nye, Hatsumi Saburo and Oliver d'Arc on Malagosto ... they had all been drawing me into it. They were like a disease. And I had come so close to being infected. I had been about to kill somebody! If Kathryn Davis had not turned and spoken to me, I might well have done what I had been told. I might have committed

murder.

The sound of the gunshot was not loud but it was close and my first thought was that I had been targeted. But even as I dropped to one knee, drawing out the Smith & Wesson, I knew that the direction was wrong, that the bullet had not come close. At that moment I was helpless. I had lost my focus, the vital self-knowledge – who I am, where I am, what is around me – that Saburo had drummed into me a hundred times. Anyone could have picked me off.

Kathryn Davis was dead. I saw it at once. She had been shot in the back of the head and lay on a circle of dark grass, her arms and legs stretched out in the shape of a star. There was someone walking towards her, wearing a coat and black gloves, a gun in his hand. I recognized the neat beard, the unworried eyes. It was Marcus, the man who had met me at the hotel.

He checked the body, nodded to himself. Then he saw me. He had his gun. I had mine. But I saw instantly that there was no question of our firing at each other. He looked at me almost sadly.

“Make sure you’re on that plane tomorrow,” he said.

I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to explain what had happened, how I felt, but he had already turned his back on me and was walking away into the shadows. In the distance I heard the wail of a police siren. It might have nothing to do with what had happened here. Even if someone had heard the shot, they wouldn’t know where it had come from. But it still warned me that it was time to go.

I walked out of the park and all the way to the Hudson River with the darkened mass of New Jersey in front of me. I took out the gun and weighed it in my hand, feeling nothing but loathing ... for it and for myself. At the same time, I was aware of the first stirrings of fear. I would pay for this.

I threw the gun into the river. Then I went back to the hotel.

The following day, I left for Venice.

ВТОРОЙ ШАНС

SECOND CHANCE

“I have to say, Yassen, we are extremely disappointed with you.”

Sefton Nye was sitting behind the desk in his darkened office, his hands coming together in a peak in front of his face as if he were at prayer. A single light shone above his head, reflecting in the polished brass buttons on the sleeves of his blazer. His heavy, white eyes were fixed on me. He was surrounded by photographs of leering pirates, trapped in the headlines of the world news. His family. He was as ruthless as they were and I wondered why I was still alive. In Silver Forest, an assassin sent by Scorpia had made a mistake. He had emptied his gun into Vladimir Sharkovsky but had failed to finish him off and for that he had been executed right in front of my eyes. But I was still here. Oliver d’Arc was also in the room, his hands folded in his lap. He had chosen a chair close to the door, as if he wanted to keep as far away from me as possible.

“What do you have to say?” Nye asked.

I had prepared for this scene, on the plane to Rome, the train to Venice, the boat across the lagoon. But now that I was actually sitting here, now that it was happening, it was very hard to keep hold of everything I had rehearsed.

“You knew I wasn’t ready,” I said. I was careful to keep my voice very matter-of-fact. I didn’t want them to think I was accusing them. The important thing was to defend myself without seeming to do so. That was my plan. If I tried to make excuses, it would all be over and Marat or Sam would spend the evening burying me in the woods. I was here for a reason. I still had to prove myself. “Your agent followed me,” I went on. “There was no other reason for him to be in Central Park. And I was never needed. He would have done the job ... which is exactly what happened. I think you knew I would fail.”

D’Arc twitched slightly. Nye said nothing. His eyes were still boring

into me. "It is true that Dr Steiner was not satisfied with your progress," he intoned at last. "He warned us there was a seventy per cent probability that you would be unable to fulfil your assignment."

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. Dr Steiner had been hired because he knew what he was doing and, despite my attempts to fool him, he had read me like a book. "If I wasn't ready, why did you let me go?" I asked.

Very slowly, Nye nodded his head. "You have a point, Yassen. Part of the reason we sent you to New York was an experiment. We wanted to see how you would operate under pressure and, in some respects, you handled yourself quite well. You successfully broke into the offices of Clarke Davenport, although it might have been wise to change your appearance ... perhaps the colour of your hair. Also, you were seen by a secretary. That was careless. However, we can overlook that. You did well to work out the movements of your target and Central Park was a sensible choice."

"But you didn't kill her!" d'Arc muttered. He sounded angry, like an old lady who has been kept waiting for her afternoon tea.

"Why did you fail?" Nye asked me.

I thought for a moment. "I think it was because she spoke to me," I said. "I had seen her photograph. I had followed her from the office. But when she spoke to me ... suddenly everything changed."

"Do you think you will ever be able to do this work?"

"Of course. Next time will be different."

"What makes you think there will be a next time?"

Another silence. The two men were making me sweat but I didn't think they were going to kill me. I already had a sense of how Scorpia operated. If they had decided I was no use to them, they wouldn't have bothered bringing me back to the island. Marcus could have shot me down with the same gun he had used on Kathryn Davis. I could have been stabbed or strangled on the boat and dropped overboard. These were people who didn't waste their time.

Nye could see that I had worked it out. "All right," he said. "We will draw a line under this unfortunate event. You are very fortunate, Yassen, that Mrs Rothman has taken a personal liking to you. It's also

to your advantage that you've had such excellent reports from your instructors. Even Dr Steiner believes there is something special about you. We think that you may one day become the very best in your profession – and whatever the reputation of our organization, we haven't forgotten that you are very young. Everyone deserves a second chance. Just be aware that there won't be a third."

I didn't thank him. It would only have annoyed him.

"We have decided to take your training up a notch. We are aware that you need to make a mental adjustment and so we want you to go back out into the field as soon as possible – but this time in the company of another agent, a new recruit. He is a man who has already killed for us on two occasions. By staying close to him, you will learn survival techniques, but more than that we hope he will be able to provide you with the edge that you seem to lack."

"He is a remarkable man," d'Arc added. "A British soldier who has seen action in Ireland and Africa. I think the two of you will get on famously."

"You will have dinner with him tonight in Venice," Nye said. "And you will spend a few weeks training with him, here on the island. As soon as he agrees that you are ready, the two of you will leave together. First you will be going to South America, to Peru. He has a target there and we're just arranging the final details. Assuming that goes well, you will return to Europe and there will be a second assignment, in Paris. The more time you spend together, the better. There's only so much you can achieve in the classroom. I think you will find this experience to be invaluable."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"When you are travelling together, you will address each other using code names only," Nye replied. "We have chosen a good one for you. You will be Cossack. There was a time when the Cossacks were famous soldiers. They were Russian, just like you, and they were much feared. I hope it will inspire you."

I nodded. "And his?"

A man stepped forward. He had been standing in the room, observing me all the time, lost in the shadows. It seemed incredible to

me that I hadn't noticed him but at the same moment I understood that he must be a master in the ninja techniques taught by Hatsumi Saburo, that he was able to hide in plain sight. He was in his late twenties and still looked like a soldier in his physique, in the way he carried himself, in his close-cut brown hair. His eyes were also brown, watchful and serious, yet with just a hint of humour. He was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. Even as he walked towards me, I saw that he was more relaxed than anyone I had met on the island. Both Nye and Oliver D'Arc seemed almost nervous of him. He was totally in control.

He reached out a hand. I shook it. He had a firm clasp.

"Hello, Yassen," he said. "I'm John Rider. The code name they've given me is Hunter."

ОХОТНИК

What is it about Alex Rider?

The Stormbreaker business may have been the first time we crossed paths, but it seems to me that our lives were like two mirrors placed opposite each other, reflecting endless possibilities. It's strange that when I met his father, Alex hadn't even been born. That was still a few months away. But those months, my time with John Rider, made a huge difference to me. He wasn't even ten years older than me but from the very start I knew that he had come from a completely different world and that we would never be on the same level. I would always look up to him.

We had dinner that night at a restaurant he knew near the Arsenal, a dark, quiet place run by a scowling woman who spoke no English and dressed in black. The food was excellent. Hunter had chosen a booth in the corner, tucked away behind a pillar, somewhere we would not be overheard. I call him that because it was the name he told me to use from the very start. He had good reason to hide his identity – there had been stories written about him in the British press – and there was less chance of my letting it slip out if it never once crossed my lips.

He ordered drinks – not alcohol but a red fruit syrup made from pomegranates called grenadine, which I had never tasted before. He spoke good Italian, though with an accent. And just as I had noted at our first meeting, he had an extraordinary ease about him, that quiet confidence. He was the sort of man you couldn't help liking. Even the elderly owner warmed up a little as she took the order.

"I want you to tell me about yourself," he said as the first course – pink slivers of prosciutto ham and chilled melon – was served. "I've read your file. I know what's happened to you. But I don't know you."

"I'm not sure where to start," I said.

“What was the best present anyone ever gave you?”

The question surprised me. It was the last thing anyone on Malagosto would have asked or would have wanted to know. I had to think for a moment. “I’m not sure,” I said. “Maybe it was the bicycle I was given when I was eleven. It was important to me because everyone in the village had one. It put me on the same level as all the other boys and it set me free.” I thought again. “No. It was this.” I slid back the cuff of my jacket. I was still wearing my Pobeda watch. After the loss of my mother’s jewels, it was the only part of my old life that had remained with me. In a way, it was quite extraordinary that I still had it, that I hadn’t been forced to pawn it in Moscow or had it stolen from me by Ivan at the *dacha*. After everything I had been through, it was still working, ticking away and never losing a minute. “It was my grandfather’s,” I explained. “He’d given it to my father and my father passed it onto me after he died. I was nine years old. I was very proud that he thought I was ready for it, and now, when I look at it, it reminds me of him.”

“Tell me about your grandfather.”

“I don’t really remember him. I only knew him when we were in Moscow and we left when I was two. He only came to Estrov a few times and he died when I was young.” I thought of the wife he had left behind. My grandmother. The last time I had seen her, she had been at the sink, peeling potatoes. Almost certainly she would have been standing there when the flames engulfed the house. “My father said he was a great man,” I recalled. “He was there at Stalingrad in 1943. He fought against the Nazis.”

“You admire him for that?”

“Of course.”

“What is your favourite food?”

I wondered if he was being serious. Was he playing psychological games with me, like Dr Steiner? “Caviar,” I replied. I had tasted it at dinner parties at the *dacha*. Vladimir Sharkovsky used to eat mounds of it, washed down with iced vodka.

“Which shoelace do you tie first?”

“Why are you asking me these questions?” I snapped.

“Are you angry?”

I didn't deny it. “What does it matter which shoelace I tie first?” I said. I glanced briefly at my trainers. “My right foot. OK? I'm right-handed. Now are you going to explain exactly what that tells you about who I am?”

“Relax, Cossack.” He smiled at me and although I was still puzzled, I found it difficult to be annoyed with him for very long. Perhaps he was playing with me but there didn't seem to be anything malicious about it. I waited to hear what he would ask next. Again, he took me by surprise. “Why do you think you were unable to kill that woman in New York?” he asked.

“You already know,” I said. “You were in the study when I told Sefton Nye.”

“You said it was because she spoke to you. But I don't think I believe you ... not completely. From what I understand, you could have gunned her down at any time. You could have done it when she turned the corner from the museum. You were certainly close enough to her when you were at Cleopatra's Needle.”

“I couldn't do it then. There were two people running, joggers...”

“I know. I was one of them.”

“What?” I was startled.

“Don't worry about it, Cossack. Sefton Nye asked me to take a look at you so I was there. We flew here on the same plane.” He raised his glass as if he was toasting me and drank. “The fact is that you had plenty of opportunities. You know that. You waited until she turned round and talked to you. I think you wanted her to talk to you because it would give you an excuse. I think you'd already made up your mind.”

He wasn't exactly accusing me. There was nothing in his face that suggested he was doing anything more than stating the obvious. But I found myself reddening. Although I would never have admitted it to Nye or d'Arc, it was possible he was right.

“I won't fail again,” I said.

“I know,” he replied. “And let's not talk about it any more. You're not being punished. I'm here to try and help. So tell me about Venice.”

I haven't had a chance to explore it yet. And I'd be interested to hear what you think about Julia Rothman. Quite a woman, wouldn't you say...?"

The second course arrived, a plate of home-made spaghetti with fresh sardines. In my time on Malagosto, I had come to love Italian food and I said so. Hunter smiled but I got the strange feeling that, once again, I had said the wrong thing.

For the next hour we talked together, avoiding anything to do with Malagosto, my training, Scorpia or anything else. He didn't tell me very much about himself but he mentioned that he lived in London and I asked him lots of questions about the city, which I had always hoped to visit. The one thing he let slip was that he had been married – although I should have noticed myself. He had a plain gold ring on his fourth finger. He didn't say anything about his wife and I wondered if he was divorced.

The bill arrived. "It's time to go back," Hunter said as he counted out the cash. "But before we go, I think I should tell you something, Cossack. Scorpia have high hopes for you. They think you have the makings of a first-rate assassin. I don't agree. I would say you have a long way to go before you're ready. It's possible you never will be."

"How can you say that?" I replied. I was completely thrown. I had enjoyed the evening and thought there was some sort of understanding between the two of us. It was as if he had turned round and slapped me in the face. "You hardly know me," I said.

"You've told me enough." He leant towards me and suddenly he was deadly serious. At that moment, I knew that he was dangerous, that I could never relax completely when I was with him. "You want to be a contract killer?" he asked. "Every answer you gave me was wrong. You tie your shoelaces with your right hand. You are right-handed. A successful assassin will be as comfortable shooting with his right hand as with his left. He has to be invisible. He has no habits. Everything he does in his life, right down to the smallest detail, he does differently every time. The moment his enemies learn something about him, the easier it is to find him, to profile him, to trap him.

"So that means you can't have preferences. Not French food, not

Italian food. If you have a favourite meal, a favourite drink, a favourite anything, that gives your enemy ammunition. Cossack is fond of caviar. Do you know how many shops there are in London that sell caviar, how many restaurants that serve it? Not many. The intelligence services may not know your name. They may not know what you look like. But if they discover your tastes, they'll be watching and you'll have made it that much easier for them to find you.

“You talk to me about your grandfather. Forget him. He's dead and you have nothing more to do with him. If he's anything to you, he's your enemy because if the intelligence services can find him, they'll dig him up and take his DNA and that will lead them to you. Why are you so proud of the fact that he fought against the Nazis? Is it because they're the bad guys? Forget it! You're the bad guy now ... as bad as any of them. In fact, you're worse because you have no beliefs. You kill simply because you're paid. And while you're at it, you might as well stop talking about Nazis, Communists, Fascists, the Ku Klux Klan... As far as you're concerned, you have no politics and every political party is the same. You no longer believe in anything, Cossack. You don't even believe in God. That is the choice you've made.”

He paused.

“Why did you blush when I asked you about New York?”

“Because you were right.” What else could I say?

“You showed your feelings to me here, at this table. You're embarrassed so you blush. You got angry when I asked you about your laces and you showed that too. Are you going to cry when you meet your next target? Are you going to tremble when you're interviewed by the police? If you cannot learn to hide your emotions, you might as well give up now. And then there's your watch...”

I knew he would come to that. I wished now that I hadn't mentioned it.

“You are Cossack, the invisible killer. You've been successful in New York, in Paris, in Peru. But the police examine the CCTV footage and what do they see? Somebody was there at all three scenes and – guess

what! – they were wearing a Russian watch, a Pobeda. You might as well leave a visiting card next to the body.” He shook his head. “If you want to be in this business, sentimentality is the last thing you can afford. Trust me, it will kill you.”

“I understand,” I said.

“I’m glad. Did you enjoy the meal?”

I was about to answer. Then I had second thoughts. “Perhaps it’s better if I don’t tell you,” I said.

Hunter nodded and got to his feet. “Well, you wolfed it down fast enough. Let’s get back to the island. Tomorrow I want to see you fight.”

He made me fight like no one else.

The next morning, at nine o’clock, we met in the gymnasium. The room was long and narrow with walls that curved overhead and windows that were too high up to provide a view. When there were monks on the island, this might have been where they took their meals, sitting in silence and contemplation. But since then it had been adapted with arc lights, stadium seating and a fighting area fourteen metres square made up of a tatami mat that offered little comfort when you fell. We were both dressed in *karate-gi*, the white, loose-fitting tunics and trousers used in karate. Hatsumi Saburo was watching from one of the stands. I could tell that he was not happy. He was sitting with his legs apart, his hands on his knees, almost challenging the new arrival to take him on. Marat and Sam were also there, along with a new student who had just joined us, a young Chinese guy who never spoke a word to me and whose name I never learnt.

We walked onto the mat together and stood face to face. Hunter was about three inches taller than me and heavier, more muscular. I knew he would have an advantage over me both in his physical reach and in the fact that he was more experienced. He began by bowing towards me, the traditional *rei* that is the first thing every combatant learns at karate school. I bowed back. And that was my first mistake. I didn’t even see the move. Something slammed into the side of my

face and suddenly I was on my back, tasting blood where I had bitten my tongue.

Hunter leant over me. “What do you think this is?” he demanded. “You think we’re here to play games, to be polite to each other? That’s your first mistake, Cossack. You shouldn’t trust me. Don’t trust anyone.”

He reached out a hand to help me to my feet. I took it – but instead of getting up I suddenly changed my grip, pulling him towards me and pressing down on his wrist. I’d adapted a ninjutsu move known as *Ura Gyaku*, or the Inside Twist, and it should have brought him spinning onto the mat. I thought I heard a grunt of satisfaction from HS but it might just as well have been derision because Hunter had been expecting my move and slammed his knee into my upper arm. If I hadn’t let go, he’d have broken it. Instantly, I rolled aside, just missing a foot strike that whistled past my head. A second later, I was on my feet. The two of us squared up again, both of us taking the Number One Posture – arms raised, our bodies turned so as to provide the smallest target possible.

I learnt more in the next twenty minutes than I had in my entire time on Malagosto. No. That’s not quite true. With HS and Mr Nye I had acquired a thorough grounding in judo, karate and ninjutsu. In an incredibly short amount of time, they had taken me all the way from novice to third or fourth *kyu* – which is to say, brown or white belt. I would spend the rest of my life building on what they had given me, and they were both far ahead of Hunter when it came to basic martial arts techniques. But he had something they hadn’t. As Oliver d’Arc had told me, Hunter had seen action as a soldier in Africa and Ireland. I would later learn that he had been with the Parachute Regiment, a rapid intervention strike force and one of the toughest outfits in the British Army. He knew how to fight in a way that they didn’t. They taught me the rules but he broke them. In that first fight we had together, he did things that simply shouldn’t have worked but somehow did. Once or twice I glimpsed HS shaking his head in disbelief, watching his own training manual being torn up. I was knocked down countless times and not once did I see the move

coming. Nothing I had been taught seemed to work against him.

After twenty minutes, he stepped back and signalled that the fight was over. "All right, Cossack, that will do for now." He smiled and held out a hand – as if to say "no hard feelings". I reached out and took it, but this time I was ready. Before he could throw me, which of course was what he intended, I twisted round, using his own weight against him. Hunter disappeared over my shoulder and crashed down onto the mat. He had landed on his back but sprang up at once.

"You're learning." He smiled his approval, then walked away, snatching up a bottle of water. I watched him, grateful that in the very last moment of the fight I had at least done something right and hadn't made a complete fool of myself in front of my teachers. At the same time it crossed my mind that he might actually have allowed me to bring him down, simply to let me save face. I had liked and admired Hunter when I had eaten with him the night before. But now I felt a sort of closeness to him. I was determined not to let him down.

We spent a lot of time together over the next few weeks – running, swimming, competing on the assault course, facing each other with more hand-to-hand combat in the gym. He was also training the other recruits and I know that they felt exactly the same way about him as I did. He was a natural teacher. Whether it was target practice or night-time scuba-diving, he brought out the best in us. Julia Rothman was also an admirer. The two of them had dinner several times when she returned to Venice, although I was never invited.

I have to say that I was not very comfortable on Malagosto. It was as if I had left school after taking my exams only to find myself inexplicably back again. Everyone knew that I had failed in New York. And time was moving on. My nineteenth birthday had come and gone without anyone noticing it ... including me. It was time to move on, to stand on my own two feet.

So I was very glad when Sefton Nye called me to his office and told me that I would be leaving in a few days. "We all agree that the last time was too early," he said. "But on this occasion you will be travelling with John Rider. He is taking care of some business for us and you will be there strictly as his assistant. You will do everything

he says. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

He had been holding my latest report, all the work of the last five weeks. I watched him as he got up from his desk and slid it into the filing cabinet against the wall. “It is very unusual for anyone to be given a second chance in this organization,” he added. He twisted round and suddenly he was gazing at me, his great, white eyes challenging me. “We can put New York behind us. John Rider speaks very highly of you and that’s what matters. It’s good to learn from your mistakes but I will give you one piece of advice, Yassen. Don’t make any more.”

I could not sleep that night. There was a storm over Venice – no wind or rain but huge sheets of lightning that flared across the sky, turning the domes and the towers of the city into black cut-outs. Winter was approaching and as I lay in bed, the curtains flapping, I could feel a chill in the air. I was excited about the mission. I was flying all the way to Peru – and if that went well, I would find myself in Paris. But there was something else. John Rider had told me almost nothing about himself. I was expected to follow him across the world, to obey him without question and yet the man was a complete mystery to me. Was he a criminal? He might have been in the British Army but why had he left? How had he found his way into Scorpia?

Suddenly I wanted to know more about John Rider. It didn’t seem fair. After all, he’d been given my files. He knew everything about me. How could we travel together when everything was so one-sided? How could I ever face him on even terms?

I slipped out of bed and got dressed. I’d made a decision without even thinking it through. It was stupid and it might be dangerous but what was my new life about if it wasn’t about taking risks? Nye kept files on everyone in his office. I had seen him lock mine away only a few hours ago. He would also have a file on John Rider. His office was on the other side of the quadrangle, just a few metres from where I was standing now. Breaking in would be easy. After all, I’d been trained.

Everyone was asleep. Nobody saw me as I left the accommodation

block and crossed the cloisters of what had once been the monastery. The door to Nye's office wasn't even locked. There were some on the island who would have regarded that as an unforgivable breach of security and it puzzled me – but I suppose he felt he was safe enough. It would have been impossible to reach Malagosto from the mainland without being detected and he knew everything about everyone who was here. Who would even have considered breaking in? The lightning flashed silently and for a brief moment I saw the iron chandelier, the books, the different clocks, the pirate faces – all of them stark white, frozen. It was as if the storm was warning me, urging me to leave while I still could. I felt a pulse of warm air, pushing against me. This was madness. I shouldn't be here.

But still I was determined. The next day I was leaving with John Rider. We were going to be together for a week or more and I would feel more comfortable – less unequal – if I knew something of his background. I'll admit that I was curious but it also made sense. I had been encouraged to learn everything I could about my targets. It seemed only right that I should apply the same rule to a man who was taking me into danger and on whom my life might depend.

I went over to the cabinet – the one where Nye had deposited my personal file. I had brought the tools I would need from my bedroom, although examining the lock, I saw it was much more sophisticated than anything I had opened before. Another dazzling burst of lightning. My own shadow seemed to leap over my shoulder. I focused on the lock, testing it with the first pick.

And then, with shocking violence, I felt myself seized from behind in a headlock, two fists crossed behind my neck, and although I immediately brought my hands up in a counter-move, reaching out for the wrists, I knew I was too late and that one sudden wrench would snap my spinal cord, killing me instantly. How could it have happened? I was certain nobody had followed me in.

For perhaps three seconds I stayed where I was, kneeling there, caught in the death grip, waiting for the crack that would be the sound of my own neck breaking. It didn't come. I felt the hands relax. I twisted round. Hunter was standing over me.

“Cossack!” he said.

“Hunter...”

“What are you doing here?” The lightning flickered but perhaps the worst of the storm had passed. “Let’s go outside,” Hunter said. “You don’t want to be found in here.”

We went back out and stood beneath the bell tower. I could feel that strange mixture of hot and cold in the air. We were enclosed by the walls of the monastery. We were alone but we spoke in low voices.

“Tell me what you were doing,” Hunter said. His face was in shadow but I could feel his eyes probing me.

I had already decided what I was going to say. I couldn’t tell him the truth. “Nye had my file this morning,” I said. “I wanted to read it.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to know I was ready. After what happened in New York, I didn’t want to let you down.”

“And you thought your report would tell you that?”

I nodded.

“You’re an idiot, Cossack.” That was what he said but there was no anger in his voice. If anything, he was amused. “I saw you go in and I followed you,” he explained. “I didn’t know who you were. I could have killed you.”

“I didn’t hear you,” I said.

He ignored that. “If I didn’t think you were ready, I wouldn’t be taking you,” he said. He thought for a moment. “I have a feeling it would be better if neither of us said anything about this little incident. If Sefton Nye knew you’d been creeping about in his study, he might get the wrong idea. I suggest you go back to bed. We’ve got an early start. The boat’s coming tomorrow at seven o’clock.”

“Thanks, Hunter.”

“Don’t thank me. Just don’t pull a stunt like this again. And...” He turned and walked away. “Get some sleep!”

* * *

I was up before sunrise. My gear was packed. I had my passport and credit cards along with the dollars I'd saved from New York. All my visas had been arranged.

There was no one around as I walked down to the edge of the lagoon, my feet crunching on the gravel. For a long time I stood there, watching the sun climb over Venice, different shades of pink, orange and finally blue rippling through the sky. I knew that my training was over and that I would not be coming back to Malagosto, at least not as a student.

I thought about Hunter, all the lessons he had taught me. He would be with me very soon and the two of us were going to travel together. He was going to give me the one thing that I had been unable to find in all my time on the island. I suppose you could call it the killer instinct. It was all I lacked.

I trusted him completely. There was something I had to do.

I took off my watch, my old Pobeda. As I weighed it in my hand, I saw my father giving it to me. I heard his voice. I was just nine years old, so young, still in short trousers, living in the house in Estrov.

My grandfather's watch.

I held it one last time, then swung my arm and threw it into the lagoon.

КОМАНДИР

THE COMMANDER

His name was Gabriel Sweetman and he was a drug lord, sometimes known as “the Sugar Man”, more often as “the Commander”.

He was born in the slums of Mexico City. Nothing is known about his parents but he first came to the attention of the police when he was eight years old, selling missing car parts to motorists. The reason the parts were missing was because he had stolen them, helped by his twelve-year-old sister, Maria. When he was twelve, he sold his sister. By then, it was said that he had killed for the first time. He moved into the drugs business when he was thirteen, first dealing on the street, then working his way up until he became the lieutenant to “Sunny” Gomez, one of the biggest traffickers in Mexico. At the time, it was estimated that Gomez was smuggling three million dollars’ worth of heroin and cocaine into America every day.

Sweetman murdered Gomez and took over his business. He also married Gomez’s wife, a former Miss Acapulco called Tracey. Thirty years later, it was rumoured that Sweetman was worth twenty-five billion dollars. He was transporting cocaine all over the world, using a fleet of Boeing 727 jet aircraft which he also owned. He had murdered over two thousand people, including fifteen judges and two hundred police officers. Sweetman would kill anyone who crossed his path and he liked to do it slowly. Some of his enemies he buried alive. It was well known that he was mad, but only his family doctor had been brave enough to say so. He had killed the family doctor.

I do not know how or why he had come to the attention of Scorpia. It is possible that they been hired to take him out by another drug lord. It might even have been the Mexican or the American government. He certainly was not being executed because he was bad. Scorpia was occasionally involved in drug trafficking itself, although it was a dirty and an unpleasant business. People who spend

large amounts of money doing harm to themselves and to their customers are not usually very reliable. Sweetman had to die because someone had paid. That was all it came down to.

And it was going to be expensive because this was not an easy kill. Sweetman looked after himself. In fact, he made Vladimir Sharkovsky look clumsy and careless by comparison.

Sweetman kept a permanent retinue around him – not just six bodyguards but an entire platoon. This was how he had got the name of the Commander. He had houses in Los Angeles, Miami and Mexico City, each one as well fortified as an army command post. The houses were kept in twenty-four-hour readiness. He never let anyone know when he was leaving or when he was about to arrive, and when he did travel it was first by private jet and then in an armour-plated, bulletproof limousine with two outriders on motorbikes and more bodyguards in front and behind. He had four food tasters, one in each of his properties.

The house where he spent most of his time was in the middle of the Amazon jungle, one hundred miles south of Iquitos. This is one of the few cities in the world that cannot be reached by road, and there were no roads going anywhere near the house either. Trying to approach on foot would be to risk attacks from jaguars, vipers, anacondas, black caimans, piranhas, tarantulas or any other of the fifty deadly creatures that inhabited the rainforest ... assuming you weren't bitten to death by mosquitoes first. Sweetman himself came and went by helicopter. He had complete faith in the pilot, largely because the pilot's elderly parents were his permanent guests and he had given instructions for them to suffer very horribly if anything ever happened to him.

Scorpia had looked into the situation and had decided that Sweetman was at his most vulnerable in the rainforest. It is interesting that they had a permanent team of advisers – strategy planners and specialists – who had prepared a consultation document for them. The house in Los Angeles was too close to its neighbours, the one in Miami too well protected. In Mexico City, Sweetman had too many friends. It was another measure of the man that he

spent ten million dollars a year on bribes. He had friends in the police, the army and the government, and if anyone asked questions about him or tried to get too close, he would know about it at once.

In the jungle, he was alone and – like so many successful men – he had a weakness. He was punctual. He ate his breakfast at exactly seven-fifteen. He worked with a personal trainer from eight until nine. He went to bed at eleven. If he said he was going to leave at midday, then that would be when he would go. This is exactly what Hunter had tried to explain to me the night we met, in Venice. Sweetman had told us something about himself. He had a habit and we could use it against him.

Hunter and I had flown first from Rome to Lima and from there we had taken a smaller plane to Iquitos, an extraordinary city on the south bank of the Amazon with Spanish cathedrals, French villas, colourful markets and straw huts built on stilts, all tangled up together along the narrow streets. The whole place seemed to live and breathe for the river. It was hot and humid. You could taste the muddy water in the air.

We stayed two days in a run-down hotel in the downtown area, surrounded by backpackers and tourists and plagued by cockroaches and mosquitoes. Since so many of the travellers were from Britain and America, we communicated only in French. I spoke the language quite badly at this stage and the practice was good for me. Hunter used the time to buy a few more supplies and to book our passage down river on a cargo boat. We were pretending to be birdwatchers. We were supposed to camp on the edge of the jungle for two weeks and then return to Iquitos. That was our cover story and while I was on Malagosto I had learned the names of two hundred different species – from the white-fronted Amazon parrot to the scarlet macaw. I believe I could still identify them to this day. Not that anybody asked too many questions. The captain would have been happy to drop us anywhere – provided we were able to pay.

We did not camp. As soon as the boat had dropped us off on a small beach with a few Amazon Indian houses scattered in the distance and children playing in the sand, we set off into the undergrowth. We

were both equipped with the five items which are the difference between life and death in the rainforest: a machete, a compass, mosquito nets, water purification tablets and waterproof shoes. The last item may sound unlikely but the massive rainfall and the dense humidity can rot your flesh in no time. Hunter had said it would take six days to reach the compound where Sweetman lived. In fact, we made it in five.

How do I begin to describe my journey through that vast, suffocating landscape... I do not know whether to call it a heaven or a hell. The world cannot live without its so-called green lungs and yet the environment was as hostile as it is possible to imagine with thousands of unseen dangers every step of the way. I could not gauge our progress. We were two tiny specks in an area that encompassed one billion acres, hacking our way through leaves and branches, always with fresh barriers in our path. All manner of different life forms surrounded us and the noise was endless: the screaming of birds, the croaking of frogs, the murmur of the river, the sudden snapping of branches as some large predator hurried past. We were lucky. We glimpsed a red and yellow coral snake ... much deadlier than its red and black cousin. In the night, a jaguar came close and I heard its awful, throaty whisper. But all the things that could have killed us left us alone and neither of us became sick. That is something that has been true throughout my whole life. I am never ill. I sometimes wonder if it is a side-effect of the injection my mother gave me. It protected me from the anthrax. Perhaps it still protects me from everything else.

We did not speak to each other as we walked. It would have been a waste of energy and all our attention was focused on the way ahead. But even so, I felt a sort of kinship with Hunter. My life depended on him. He seemed to find the way almost instinctively. I also admired his fitness and stamina as well as his general knowledge of survival techniques. He knew exactly which roots and berries to eat, how to follow the birds and insects to waterholes or, failing that, how to extract water from vines. He never once lost his temper. The jungle can play with your mind. It is hot and oppressive. It always seems to

stand in your way. The insects attack you, no matter how much cream you put on. You are dirty and tired. But Hunter remained good-natured throughout. I sensed that he was pleased with our progress and satisfied that I was able to keep up.

We only slept for five hours at night, using the moon to guide us after the sun had set. We slept in hammocks. It was safer to be above the ground. After we'd eaten our jungle rations – what we'd found or what we'd brought with us – we'd climb in and I always looked forward to the brief conversation, the moment of companionship, we would have before we slept.

On the fourth night we set up camp in an area which we called The Log. It was a circular clearing dominated by a fallen tree. When I had sat on it I had almost fallen right through, as it was completely rotten and crawling with termites. “You’ve done very well so far,” Hunter said. “It may not be so easy coming back.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s possible we’ll be pursued. We may have to move more quickly.”

“The red pins...”

“That’s right.”

Whenever we came to a particular landmark, a place with a choice of more than one route, I had seen Hunter pressing a red pin close to the base of a tree trunk. He must have positioned more than a hundred of them. Nobody else would notice them but they would provide us with a series of pointers if we needed to move in a hurry.

“What will we do if he isn’t there?” I asked. “Sweetman may have left.”

“According to our intelligence, he’s not leaving until the end of the week. And never call him by his name, Cossack. It personalizes him. We need to think of him as an object ... as dead meat. That’s all he is to us.” His voice floated out of the darkness. Overhead, a parrot began to screech. “Call him the Commander. That’s how he likes to see himself.”

“When will we be there?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I want to get there before sunset ... to give

us time to reconnoitre the place. I need to find a position, to make the kill.”

“I could shoot him for you.”

“No, Cossack, thanks all the same time. This time you’re strictly here for the ride.”

We were up again at first light, the sky silver, the trees and undergrowth dark. We sipped some water and took energy tablets. We rolled up our hammocks, packed our rucksacks and left.

Sure enough, we reached the compound in the late afternoon. As we folded back the vegetation, we were suddenly aware of the sun glinting off a metal fence and crouched down, keeping out of sight. It was always possible that there would be guards patrolling outside the perimeter, although after half an hour we realized that the Commander had failed to take this elementary precaution. Presumably he felt he was safe enough inside.

Moving very carefully, we circled round, always staying in the cover of the jungle some distance from the fence. Hunter was afraid that there would be radar, tripwires and all sorts of other devices that we might activate if we got too close. Looking through the gaps in the trees, we could see that the fence was electrified and enclosed a collection of colonial buildings spread out over a pale green lawn. They were similar in style to the ones we had seen in Iquitos. There were a lot of guards in dark green uniforms, patrolling the area or standing with binoculars and assault rifles in rusting metal towers. Their long isolation had done them no good. They were shabby and listless. Hunter and I were both wearing jungle camouflage with our faces painted in streaks, but if we’d been in bright red they would not have noticed us.

The compound had begun life twenty years before as a research centre for an environmental group studying the damage being done to the rainforest. They had all died from a mysterious sickness and a week later the Commander had moved in. Since then, he had adapted it to his own needs, adding huts for his soldiers and bodyguards, a helicopter landing pad, a private cinema, all the devices he needed for his security. In some ways it reminded me of the *dacha* in Silver

Forest, although the setting could not have been more different. It was only their purpose that was the same.

The Commander lived in the largest house, which was raised off the ground, with a veranda and electric fans. Presumably there would be a generator somewhere inside the complex. We watched through field glasses for more than an hour, when suddenly he emerged, oddly dressed in a silk dressing gown and pyjamas. It was still early evening. He went over to speak to a second man in faded blue overalls. His pilot? The helicopter was parked nearby, a four-seater Robinson R44. The two of them exchanged a few words, then the Commander went back into the house.

“It’s a shame we can’t hear them,” I said.

“The Commander is leaving at eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” Hunter replied.

I stared at him. “How do you know?”

“I can lip-read, Cossack. It comes in quite useful sometimes. Maybe you should learn to do the same.”

I hardly slept that night. We retreated back into the undergrowth and hooked up our hammocks once more, but we couldn’t risk the luxury of a campfire and didn’t speak a word. We swallowed down some cold rations and closed our eyes. But I lay there for a long time, all sorts of thoughts running through my head.

I really had hoped that Hunter might let me make the kill. My old psychiatrist, Dr Steiner, would not have been happy if I had told him this, but I thought it would be much easier to assassinate a drug lord, an obviously evil human being, than a defenceless woman in New York. It would have been a good test for me ... my first kill. But I could see now that it was out of the question. The position of the helicopter in relation to the main house meant that we would have, at most, ten seconds to make the shot. Just ten steps and the Commander would be safely inside. If I hesitated or, worse still, missed, we would not have a second opportunity. Sefton Nye had already told me. I was here to assist and to observe and I knew I had to accept it. Hunter was the one in charge.

We were in position much earlier than we needed to be – at seven

o'clock. Hunter had been carrying the weapon he was going to use ever since we had left Iquitos. It was a .88 Winchester sniper rifle; a very good weapon, perfect for long-range shooting with minimal recoil. I watched as he loaded it with a single cartridge and adjusted the sniper scope. It seemed to me that he and the weapon were one. I had noticed this already on the shooting range on Malagosto. When Hunter held a gun, it became part of him.

The minutes ticked away. I used my field glasses to scan the compound, waiting for the Commander to reappear. The soldiers were in their towers or patrolling the fence but the atmosphere was lazy. They were really only half awake. At ten to eight, the pilot came out of his quarters, yawning and stretching. We watched as he climbed into the helicopter, went through his checks and started the rotors. Very quickly, they began to turn, then disappeared in a blur. All around us, birds and monkeys scattered through the branches, frightened away by the noise. The Commander had still not stepped out at two minutes to eight and I began to wonder if he had changed his mind. I knew the time from the cheap watch that I had bought for myself at the airport. I was sweating. I wondered if it was nerves or the close, stifling heat of the morning.

Something touched my shoulder.

My first thought was that it was a leaf that had fallen from a tree – but I knew at once that it was too heavy for a leaf.

It moved.

My hand twitched and it was all I could do to stop myself reaching out and attempting to flick this ... thing, whatever it was ... away. I felt its weight shift as it went from my shoulder onto my neck and I realized that it was alive and that it was moving. It reached the top of my shirt and I shuddered as its legs prickled delicately against my skin. Even without seeing it, I knew it was some sort of spider, a large one. It had lowered itself onto me while I crouched behind Hunter.

My mouth had gone dry. I could feel the blood pounding in the jugular vein that ran up the side of my neck and I knew that the creature would have been drawn to that area, fascinated by the warmth and by the movement. And that was where it remained,

clinging to me like some hideous growth. Hunter had not seen what had happened. He was still focused on the compound, his eye pressed against the sniper scope. I didn't dare call out. I had to keep my breath steady without turning my head. Straining, I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw it. I recognized it at once. A black widow. One of the most venomous spiders in the Amazon.

It still refused to move. Why wouldn't it continue on its way? I tensed myself, waiting for it to continue its journey across my face and into my hair, but still it stayed where it was. I didn't know if Hunter had brought anti-venom with him but it would make no difference if he had. If it bit me in the neck, I would die very quickly. Maybe it was waiting to strike even now, savouring the moment. The spider was huge. My skin was recoiling, my whole body sending out alarm signals that my brain could not ignore.

I wanted to call to Hunter, but even speaking one word might be enough to alarm the spider. I was filled with rage. After the failure of New York I had been determined that I would give a good account of myself in Peru, and so far I hadn't put a foot wrong. I couldn't believe that this had happened to me ... and now! I tried to think of something I could do ... anything ... but I was helpless. There was no further movement in the compound. Everyone was waiting for the Commander to make his appearance. I knew it would happen at any moment. It was strangely ironic that I might die at exactly the same time as him.

In the end, I whistled. It was such an odd thing to do that it would surely attract Hunter's attention. It did. He turned and saw me standing there, paralysed, no colour in my face. He saw the spider.

And it was right then that the door of the house opened and the Commander came out, wearing an olive green tunic and carrying a briefcase, followed by two men with a third walking ahead. I knew at that moment that I was dead. There was nothing Hunter could do for me. He had his instructions from Scorpia and less than ten seconds in which to carry them out. I had almost forgotten about the helicopter but now the whine of its rotors enveloped me. The Commander was walking steadily towards the cockpit.

Hunter made an instant decision. He sprang to his feet and moved behind me. Was he really going to abort the mission and save my life? Surely it had to be one or the other. Shoot the Commander or get rid of the spider. He couldn't do both and after everything he had told me, his choice was obvious.

I didn't know what he was doing. He had positioned himself behind me. The Commander had almost reached the helicopter, his hand stretching out towards the door. Then, with no warning at all, Hunter fired. I heard the explosion and felt a streak of pain across my neck, as if I had been sliced with a red hot sword. The Commander grabbed hold of his chest and crumpled, blood oozing over his clenched fingers. He had been shot in the heart. The men surrounding him threw themselves flat, afraid they would be targeted next. I was also bleeding. Blood was pouring down the side of my neck. But the spider had gone.

That was when I understood. Hunter had aimed through the spider and at the Commander. He had shot them both with the same bullet.

"Let's move," he whispered.

There was no time to discuss what had happened. The bodyguards were already panicking, shouting and pointing in our direction. One of them opened fire, sending bullets randomly into the rainforest. The guards in the towers were searching for us. More men were running out of the huts.

We snatched up our equipment and ran, allowing the mass of leaves and branches to swallow us up. We left behind us a dead drug lord with a single bullet and a hundred tiny fragments of black widow in his heart.

"You saved my life," I said.

Hunter smiled. "Taking a life and saving a life ... and with just one bullet. That's not bad going," he said.

We had put fifteen miles between ourselves and the compound, following the red pins until the fading light made it impossible to continue and we had to stop for fear of losing our way. We had reached The Log, the campsite where we had spent the night before,

and this time I was careful not to sit on the hollow tree. Hunter spent ten minutes stretching out tripwires all around us. These were almost invisible, connected to little black boxes that he screwed into the trunks of the trees. Once again, we didn't dare light a fire. After we had hooked up our hammocks, we ate our dinner straight out of the tin. It amused me that Hunter insisted on carrying the empty tins with us. He had just killed a man, but he wouldn't litter the rainforest.

Neither of us was ready for sleep. We sat cross-legged on the ground, listening out for the sound of approaching feet. It was a bright night. The moon was shining and everything around us was a strange silvery green. To my surprise, Hunter had produced a quarter-bottle of malt whisky. It was the last thing I would have expected him to bring along. I watched him as he held it to his lips.

"It's a little tradition of mine," he explained, in a low voice. "A good malt whisky after a kill. This is a twenty-five-year-old Glenmorangie. Older than you!" He held it out to me. "Have some, Cossack. I expect your nerves need it after that little incident. That spider certainly chose its moment."

"I can't believe what you did," I said. There was a bandage around my neck, already stained with sweat and blood. It hurt a lot and I knew that I would always have a scar where Hunter's bullet had cut me, but in a strange way I was glad. I did not want to forget this night. I sipped the whisky. It burnt the back of my throat. "What now?" I asked.

"A slog back to Iquitos and then Paris. At least it'll be a little cooler over there. And no damn mosquitoes!" He slapped one on the side of his neck.

We were both at peace. The Commander was dead, killed in extraordinary circumstances. We had the whisky. The moon was shining. And we were alone in the rainforest. That's the only way that I can explain the conversation that followed. At least, that was how it seemed at the time.

"Hunter," I said. "Why are you with Scorpia?" I would never normally have asked. It was wrong. It was insolent. But out here, it didn't seem to matter.

I thought he might snap at me but he reached out for the bottle and answered quietly, "Why does anyone join Scorpia? Why did you?"

"You know why," I said. "I didn't really have any choice."

"We all make choices, Cossack. Who we are in this world, what we do in it. Generous or selfish. Happy or sad. Good or evil. It's all down to choice."

"And you chose this?"

"I'm not sure it was the right choice but I've got nobody else to blame, if that's what you mean." He paused, holding the bottle in front of him. "I was in a pub," he said. "It was in the middle of London ... in Soho. Me and a couple of friends. We were just having a drink, minding our own business. But there was a man in there, a taxi driver as it turned out ... a big fat guy in a sheepskin coat. He overheard us talking and realized we were all army, and he began to make obnoxious remarks. Stupid things. I should have just ignored him or walked out. That was what my friends wanted to do.

"But I'd been drinking myself and the two of us got into an argument. It was so bloody stupid. The next thing I knew, I'd knocked him to the ground. Even then, there were a dozen ways I could have hit him. But I'd let my training get the better of me. He didn't get up and suddenly the police were there and I realized what I'd done." He paused. "I'd killed him."

He fell silent. All around us, the insects continued their chatter. There wasn't a breath of wind.

"I was dismissed from the army and thrown into jail," he went on. "As it happened, I wasn't locked up for very long. My old regiment pulled a few strings and I had a good lawyer. He managed to put in a claim of self-defence and I was let out on appeal. But after that I was finished. No one was going to employ me and even if they did, d'you think I wanted to spend the rest of my life as a security guard or behind a desk? I didn't know what to do. And then Scorpia came along and offered me this. And I said yes."

"Are you married?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. I've been married three years and there's a kid on the way. At least I'm going to have enough money to be able to

look after him.” He paused. “If it is a boy. You see what I mean? My choice.”

The whisky bottle passed between us one last time. It was almost empty.

“Maybe it’s not too late for you to change your mind,” he said.

I was startled. “What do you mean?”

“I’m thinking about New York. I’m thinking about the last few weeks ... and today. You seem like a nice kid to me, Cossack. Not one of Scorpia’s usual recruits at all. I wonder if you’ve really got it in you to be like me. Marat and Sam ... they don’t give a damn. They’ve got no imagination. But you...?”

“I can do this,” I said.

“But do you really *want* to? I’m not trying to dissuade you. That’s the last thing I want to do. I just want you to be aware that once you start, there’s no going back. After the first kill – that’s it.”

He hesitated. We both did. I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“If I backed out now, Scorpia would kill me.”

“I rather doubt it. They’d be annoyed, of course. But I think you’re exaggerating your own importance. They’d very quickly forget you. Anyway, you’ve learnt enough to keep away from them. You could change your identity, your appearance, start somewhere new. The world is a big place – and there are all sorts of different things you could be doing in it.”

“Is that what you’re advising me?” I asked.

“I’m not advising you anything. I’m just laying out the options.”

I’m not sure what I would have said if the conversation had continued but just then we heard something; the croaking of a frog at the edge of the clearing. At least, that was what it would have sounded like to anyone approaching, but it wasn’t a frog that was native to the Amazon rainforest. One of the wires that Hunter had set down had just been tripped and what we were hearing was a recording, a warning. Hunter was on his feet instantly, crouching down, signalling to me with an outstretched hand. I had a gun. It had been supplied to me when we were in Iquitos – a Browning 9mm semi-automatic, popular with the Peruvian Army and unusual in that

it held thirteen rounds of ammunition. It was fully loaded.

I heard another sound. The single crack of a branch breaking, about twenty metres away. A beam of light flickered between the trees, thrown by a powerful torch. There was no time to gather up our things and no point in wondering who they were, how they had followed us here. We had already planned what to do if this happened. We got up and began to move.

They came in from all sides. Six of the Commander's men had taken it upon themselves to follow us into the rainforest. Why? Their employer was dead and there was going to be no reward for bringing in his killers. Perhaps they were genuinely angry. We had, after all, removed the source of their livelihood. I saw all of them as they arrived. The moon was so bright that they barely had any need of their torches. They were high on drugs, dirty and dishevelled with hollow faces, bright eyes and straggly beards.

Two of them had cigarettes dangling from their mouths. They were wearing bits and pieces of military uniform with machine guns slung over their shoulders. One of them had a dog, a pit bull terrier, on a chain. The dog had brought them here. It began to bark, straining against the leash, knowing we were close.

But the men saw no one. They had arrived at an empty clearing with a tree lying on its side, nobody in front of it, nobody behind, termites crawling over the bark. Our empty hammocks were in front of them. Perhaps their torches picked up the empty whisky bottle on the ground.

"¡Vamos a hacerlo!" One of them gave the order in Spanish, his voice deep and guttural.

As one, the men opened fire, spraying the clearing with bullets, shooting into the surrounding jungle. After the peace of the night, the noise was deafening. For at least thirty seconds the clearing blazed white and the surrounding leaves and branches were chopped to smithereens. None of the men knew what they were doing. They didn't care that they had no target.

We waited until their clips had run out and then we stood up, dead wood cascading off our shoulders. We had been right next to the

soldiers, lying face down, inside the fallen tree. We were covered with termites, which were crawling over our backs and into our clothes. But termites do not bite you. They do not sting. We had disturbed their habitat and they were all over us but we didn't care.

We opened fire. The soldiers saw us too late. I was not sure what happened next, whether I actually killed any of them. There was a blaze of gunfire, again incredibly loud, and I saw the ragged figures being blown off their feet. One of them managed to fire again but the bullets went nowhere, into the air. I was firing wildly but Hunter was utterly precise and mechanical, choosing his targets then squeezing the trigger again and again. It was all over very quickly. The six men were dead. There didn't seem to be any more on the way.

I brushed termites off my shoulders and out of my hair. "Is that all of them?" I whispered.

"I don't think so," Hunter said. "But we'd better get moving."

We collected our things.

"I shot them," I said. "What you were saying to me ... you were wrong. I was with you. I killed some of them." I wasn't even sure it was true. Hunter could have taken out all six himself. But we weren't going to argue about it now.

He shook his head. "*If* you killed..." He put the emphasis on the first word. "You did it in the dark, in self-defence. That doesn't make you a murderer. It's not the same."

"Why not?" I couldn't understand him. What was he trying to achieve?

He turned and suddenly there was a real darkness in his eyes. "You want to know what the difference is, Yassen?" He had used my real name for the first time. "We have another job in Paris, very different to this one. You want to know what it's really like to kill? You're about to find out."

ПАРИЖ

PARIS

Our target in Paris was a man called Christophe Vosque, a senior officer in the *Police nationale*. He was, as it happens, totally corrupt. He had received payments from Scorpia, and in return had turned a blind eye to many of their operations in France. But recently he had got greedy. He was demanding more payments and, worse still, he had been in secret talks with the DGSE, the French secret service. He was planning a double-cross and Scorpia had decided to make an example of him by taking him out. This was to be a punishment killing. It had to make headlines.

However, for once Scorpia had got their intelligence wrong. No sooner had we arrived at Charles de Gaulle Airport than we were informed that Vosque was not in the city after all. He had gone on a five-day training course, meaning that we had the entire week to ourselves. Hunter wasn't at all put out.

"We need a rest," he said. "And since Scorpia's paying, we might as well check ourselves in somewhere decent. I can show you around Paris. I'm sure you'll like it."

He booked us into the luxurious Hotel George V, close to the Champs-Élysées. It was far more than decent. In fact, I had never stayed anywhere like this. The hotel was all velvet curtains, chandeliers, thick carpets, tinkling pianos and massive flower displays. My bathroom was marble. The bath had gold taps. Everyone who stayed here was rich and they weren't afraid to show it. I wondered if Hunter had brought me here for a reason. Normally we would have stayed somewhere more discreet and out-of-the-way but I suspected that he was testing me, throwing me into this gorgeous, alien environment to see how I would cope. He spoke excellent French; mine was rudimentary. He was in his late twenties and already well travelled; I was nineteen. I think it amused him to see

me dealing with the receptionists, the managers and the waiters in their stiff collars and black ties, trying to convince them that I had as much right to be there as anyone ... trying to convince myself.

It was certainly true that we both deserved a rest. The journey into the rainforest and out again, the death of the Commander, the shoot-out that had followed, our time in Iquitos, even the long flight back to Europe had exhausted us, and we both had to be in first-rate condition when we came up against Vosque. And if that meant eating the best food, and waking up in five-star luxury, I wasn't going to argue.

We had adjoining rooms on the third floor and both spent the first twenty-four hours asleep. When I woke up, I ordered room service ... the biggest breakfast I have ever eaten, even though it was the middle of the afternoon. I had a hot bath with the foam spilling over the edges. I sprawled on the bed and watched TV. They had English and Russian channels but I forced myself to listen in French, trying to attune myself to the language.

The next day, Hunter showed me the city. I had done more travelling in the past few weeks – Venice, New York, Peru – than I had in my entire life, but I loved every minute of my time in Paris. A few of the things we did were obvious. We went up the Eiffel Tower. We visited Notre-Dame. We strolled around the Louvre and stood in front of its most famous works of art. All this could have been boring. I have never been very interested in tourism, staring at things and taking photographs of them simply because they are there. But Hunter made it fun. He had stories and insights that brought everything to life. Standing in front of the *Mona Lisa* he told me how it had once been stolen – that was back in 1911 – and explained how he would set about stealing it now. He described how Notre-Dame had been constructed, an incredible feat of engineering, more than eight hundred years before. And he took me to many unexpected places: the sewers, the flea markets, Père-Lachaise Cemetery with its bizarre mausoleums and famous residents, the sculpture garden where Rodin had once lived.

But what I enjoyed most was just walking the streets – along the

Seine, through the Latin quarter, around the Marais. It was quite cold – spring had still not quite arrived – but the sun was out and there was a sparkle in the air. We drifted in and out of coffee houses. We browsed in antique shops and bought clothes on the Avenue Montaigne. We ate fantastic ice cream at Maison Berthillon on the Île-St-Louis. Curiously, this was where the founder members of Scorpia had first come together – but perhaps wisely there was no blue plaque to commemorate the event.

We ate extremely well in restaurants that were empty of tourists. Hunter didn't like to spend a fortune on food and never ordered alcohol. He preferred grenadine, the red syrup he had introduced me to in Venice. I drink it to this day.

We never once discussed the business that had brought us here but we were quietly preparing for it. At six o'clock every morning we went on a two-hour run together... It was a spectacular circuit down the Champs-Élysées, through the Jardins des Tuileries and across the Seine. There was a pool and a gym at the hotel and we swam and worked out for two hours or more. I sometimes wondered what people made of us. We could have been friends on holiday or perhaps, given our age difference, an older and a younger brother. That was how it felt sometimes. Hunter never referred back to our conversation in the jungle, although some of the things he had said remained in my mind.

We had arrived on a Monday. On the Thursday, Hunter received a note from the concierge as we were leaving the hotel and read it quickly without showing it to me. After that, I sensed that something had changed. We took the Metro to Montmartre that day and walked around the narrow streets with all the artists' studios and drank coffee in one of the squares. It was just warm enough to sit outside. By now we were relaxed in each other's company but I could tell that Hunter was still agitated. It was only when we reached the great white church of Sacré-Cœur, with its astonishing views of Paris, that he turned to me.

"I need to have some time on my own," he said. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not." I was surprised that he even needed to ask.

“There’s someone I have to meet,” he went on. He was more uneasy than I had ever seen him. “But I’m breaking the rules. We’re both under cover. We’re working. Do you understand what I’m saying? If Julia Rothman found out about this, she wouldn’t be pleased.”

“I won’t tell her anything,” I said. And I meant it. I would never have betrayed Hunter.

“Thank you,” he said. “We can meet back at the hotel.”

I walked away but I was still curious. The more I knew about Hunter the more I got the feeling that there were so many things he wasn’t telling me. So when I reached the street corner, I turned back. I wanted to know what he was going to do.

And that was when I saw her.

She was standing on the terrace in front of the main entrance of the church. There were quite a few tourists around but she stood out because she was alone and pregnant. She was quite small – the French would say *petite* – with long fair hair and pale skin, wearing a loose, baggy jacket with her hands tucked into her pockets. She was pretty.

Hunter was walking towards her. She saw him and I saw her face light up with joy. She hurried over to him. And then the two of them were in each other’s arms. Her head was pressed against his chest. He was stroking her hair. Two lovers on the steps of *Sacré-Cœur* ... what could be more Parisian? I turned the corner and walked away.

The next day, Vosque returned.

He lived in the fifth *arrondissement*, in a quiet street of flats and houses not far from the Panthéon, the elaborate church that had been modelled on a similar building in Rome and where many of the great and good of France were buried. Hunter had received a full briefing in an envelope sealed with a scorpion. I guessed it had been delivered to his hotel room by someone like Marcus, who had done the same for me in New York. The two of us went to a café on the Champs-Élysées. It might have seemed odd to discuss this sort of business in a public place but in fact it was safer to choose somewhere completely random. We could make sure we weren’t being followed. And we knew it couldn’t be bugged.

Vosque provided a very different challenge to the Commander. He might be easier to reach but he probably knew we were coming so there was a good chance he had taken precautions. He would carry a gun. He could expect protection from the French police. As far as they were concerned, he was one of them, a senior officer and a man to be respected. If he was gunned down in the street, there would be an immediate outcry. Ports and airports would be closed. We would find ourselves at the centre of an international manhunt.

He lived alone. Hunter produced some photographs of his address. They had been provided by Scorpia and showed a ground-floor apartment with glass doors and double-height windows on the far side of a courtyard shared by two more flats. Although one of these was empty, the other was occupied by a young artist, a potential witness. An archway opened onto the street. There was no other way in and an armed policeman – a *gendarme* – had been stationed in the little room that had once been the porter's lodge. To reach Vosque, we had to get past him.

In all our discussions, we called Vosque “the Cop”. As always, it was easier to depersonalize him. On the Saturday, we watched him leave the flat and walk to his local supermarket, two streets away. He was a short, bullish man, in his late forties. As he walked, he swung his fists and you could imagine him lashing out at anyone who got in his way. He was almost bald with a thick moustache that didn't quite stretch to the end of his lip. He was wearing an old-fashioned suit but no tie. After he had done his shopping, he stopped at a café for a cigar and a *demi-pression* of beer. Nobody had escorted him and I thought it would be a simple matter to shoot him where he sat. We could do it without being seen.

But Hunter wasn't having any of it. “That's not what Scorpia wants,” he said. “He has to be killed in his home.”

“Why?”

“You'll see.”

I didn't like the sound of that but I knew better than to ask anything more.

Our Paris holiday was over. Even the weather had changed. On

Sunday morning it rained and the whole city seemed to be sulking, the water spitting off the pavements and forming puddles in the roads. This was the day when Vosque was going to die. If we wanted to find him alone in his flat, it made sense. Monday to Friday he would be in his office, which was situated inside the Interior Ministry. According to his file, most evenings he went out drinking or ate with friends in cheap restaurants around the Gare St-Lazare. Sunday for him was dead time – in more than one sense.

That morning, Annabelle Finnan, the artist who lived next door to Vosque, received a telephone call from the town of Orléans, telling her that her elderly mother had been run over by a van and was unlikely to survive. This was untrue but Annabelle left at once. We were waiting in the street and saw her flag down a taxi. Then we moved forward.

We were both wearing cheap suits, white shirts and black ties. We were carrying bibles. The disguise had been Hunter's idea and it was a brilliant one. We had come as Jehovah's Witnesses. There had been real ones, apparently, working in the area and nobody would have noticed two more, following in their wake. The *gendarme* in the porter's lodge saw us and dismissed us in the same instant. We were the last thing he needed on a wet Sunday morning, two Bible-bashers come to preach to him about the end of the world.

"Not here!" the *gendarme* grunted. "Thank you very much, my friends. We're not interested."

"But, *monsieur...*" Hunter began.

"Just move along..."

Hunter was holding his bible at a strange angle and I saw his hand press down on the spine. There was a soft hissing sound and the *gendarme* jerked backwards and collapsed. The bible must have been supplied by Gordon Ross, all the way from Malagosto. It had fired a knock-out dart. I could see the little tuft sticking out of the man's neck.

"And on the seventh day, he rested," Hunter muttered and I recognized the quotation from the second chapter of Genesis.

The two of us moved into the office. Hunter had brought rope and

tape with him. “Tie him up,” he said. “We’ll be gone long before he wakes up but it’s best not to take chances.”

I did as I was told, securely fastening his wrists and ankles, and using the tape and a balled-up handkerchief to gag his mouth. After everything Hunter had told me, I was a little surprised that he hadn’t simply shot the policeman. Wouldn’t that have been easier? But perhaps, at the end of the day and despite everything he had said, he preferred not to take a life unless it was really necessary.

With the *gendarme* hidden away, we walked across the courtyard, our bibles in our hands. I thought we would go straight to Vosque’s door but instead Hunter steered us over to the artist’s flat and rang the bell there. It was a nice touch. She wasn’t in, of course, but if Vosque happened to be watching out of his window, the fact that we were patiently waiting there would make us look completely innocent. We stood outside for a minute or two, ignoring the thin drizzle that was slanting down onto the cobblestones. Hunter pretended to slip a note through the letterbox. Then we went over to Vosque’s place and rang the bell.

He must have seen us coming and he didn’t suspect a thing. He was already in a bad mood as he opened the door, wearing a vest and pants with a striped dressing gown falling off his shoulders. He hadn’t shaved yet.

“Get the hell out of here,” he snarled. “I haven’t—”

That was as far as he got. Hunter didn’t use another anaesthetic dart. He hit him, very hard, under the chin. It wasn’t a killer blow, although it could have been. He caught the Cop as he fell and dragged him into the apartment. I closed the door behind us. We were in.

The flat was almost bare. The floor was uncarpeted, the furniture minimal. There were no pictures on the walls. It was private. Net curtains hung over the windows and although there was a glass door leading into a tiny back garden – unusual for a Paris property – nobody could see in. A bedroom led off to one side. There was an open-plan kitchen, where, from the looks of it, Vosque hardly ever cooked anything much more than a boiled egg.

Hunter had manhandled the Cop across the floor and onto a wooden chair. "Find something to tie him up with," he said. "He should have some ties in the bedroom. If you can't find any, use a sheet off the bed. Tear it into strips."

I was mystified. What were we doing? Our orders were to kill the man, not threaten or interrogate him. Why wasn't he already dead? But once again I didn't argue. Vosque had quite a collection of ties. I took five of them from his wardrobe and used them to bind his arms and legs, keeping the last one to gag his mouth. Hunter said nothing while I worked. I had already seen that intense concentration of his when we were in the jungle but this time there was something else. I was aware that he had something in his mind and for some reason it made me afraid.

He checked that the Cop was secure, then went over to the sink, filled a glass of water and threw it in his face. The cop's eyes flickered open. I saw the jolt as he returned to consciousness and the fear as he took in his predicament. He began to struggle violently, rocking back and forth, as if there was any chance of him breaking free. Hunter signalled at him to stop. The Cop swore and shouted at him but the words were muffled, incomprehensible beneath the gag. Eventually, he stopped fighting. He could see it would do no good.

I didn't dare speak. I wasn't even sure what language I would be expected to use.

Hunter turned to me.

"You want to be an assassin," he said, speaking in Russian now. "When you were in the jungle, you told me you killed some of the men who came after us. I'm not so sure about that. It was dark and I have a feeling I was the one who knocked all of them off. But that doesn't matter. You said you were ready to kill. I didn't believe you. Well, now's your chance to prove it. I want you to kill Vosque."

I looked at him. Then I turned to the Cop. I'm not sure that the Frenchman had understood what we were saying. He was silent, gazing straight ahead as if he was outraged, as if we had no right to be here.

"You want me to kill him," I said in Russian.

“Yes. With this.”

He held out a knife. He had brought it with him and I stared at it with complete horror. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The knife was razor-sharp. There could be no doubt of that. I had never seen anything quite so evil. But it was tiny. The blade was more like an old-fashioned safety razor. It couldn't have been more than four or five centimetres long.

“That's crazy,” I said. I was clinging to the thought that perhaps this was some sort of joke, although there was no chance of that. Hunter was deadly serious. “Give me a gun. I'll shoot him.”

“That's not what I'm asking, Yassen. This is meant to be a punishment killing. I want you to use the knife.”

He had named me in front of the victim. Even though he was speaking in Russian, there was no going back.

“Why?”

“Why are you arguing? You know how we work. Do as you're told.”

He pressed the knife into my hand. It was terribly light, barely more than a sliver of sharpened metal in a plastic handle. And at that moment I understood the point of all this. If I killed Vosque with this weapon, it would be slow and it would be painful. I would feel every cut that I made. And it might take several cuts. This wasn't going to be just a quick stab to the heart. However I did it, I would end up drenched in the man's blood.

A punishment killing. For both of us.

Something deep inside me rose to the surface. I was shocked, disgusted that he could behave this way. We'd just had five amazing days in Paris. In a way, they'd wiped out everything bad that had happened to me before. He'd been almost like a brother to me. Certainly, he had been my friend. And now, suddenly, he was utterly cold. From the way he was standing there, I could see that I meant nothing to him. And he was asking me to do something unspeakable.

Butchery.

And yet he was right. At the end of the day, it was a lesson I had to learn ... if I was going to do this work. Not every assassination would take place from the top of a building or the other side of a perimeter

fence. I had to get my hands dirty.

I examined the Cop. He was struggling again, his stomach heaving underneath his vest, jerking the chair from side to side, whimpering. His whole face had gone red. He had seen the knife. I balanced it in my hand, once again feeling the flimsy weight. Where was I to start? I supposed the only answer was to cut his throat. Gordon Ross had even given us a demonstration once, but he had used a plastic dummy.

“You need to get on with it, Yassen,” Hunter said. “We haven’t got all day.”

“I can’t.”

I had spoken the words without realizing it. They had simply slipped out of my mouth.

“Why can’t you?”

“Because...”

I didn’t want to answer. I couldn’t explain. Vosque might not be a good man. He was corrupt. He took bribes. But he was a man nonetheless. Not a paper target. He was right here, in front of me, terrified. I could see the sweat on his forehead and I could smell him. I just didn’t have it in me to take his life ... and certainly not with this hideous, pathetic knife.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“All right. Go outside. Wait for me there.”

This time I did what I was told without questioning. If I had stayed there a minute longer, I’d have been sick. As I opened the front door I heard the soft thud of a bullet fired from a silenced pistol and knew that Hunter had taken care of matters himself. I was still holding the knife. I couldn’t leave it behind. It was covered in forensic evidence that might lead the police to me. I carefully slid it into the top pocket of my jacket where it nestled, the blade over my heart.

Hunter came out. “Let’s go,” he said. He didn’t seem angry. He showed no emotion at all.

Walking back across the city, I told him my decision.

“I’m taking your advice,” I said. “I don’t want to be an assassin. I’m

leaving Paris. I'm not coming back to Rome. I'm going to disappear."

"I didn't give you that advice," Hunter said. "But I think it's a good idea."

"Scorpiia will find me."

"Go back to Russia, Yassen. It's a huge country. Russian is your first language and now you have skills. Find somewhere to hide. Start again."

"Yes." I felt a sense of sadness and had to express it. "I let you down," I said.

"No, you didn't. I'm glad it worked out this way. The moment I first saw you, I had a feeling that you weren't suited to this sort of work and I'm pleased you've proved me right. Don't be like me, Yassen. Have a life. Start a family. Keep away from the shadows. Forget all this ever happened."

We came to a bridge. I took out the knife and dropped it into the Seine. Then we walked on together, making our way back to the hotel.

МОЩНОСТЬ ПЛЮС

POWER PLUS

We went to the airport, sitting together in the back of a taxi with our luggage in the boot. Hunter was flying to Rome and then to Venice, to report to Julia Rothman. I was heading for Berlin. It would have been madness to take a plane to Moscow or anywhere in Russia. That have provided Scorpia with a giant arrow pointing in the right direction to come after me. Berlin was at the hub of Europe and gave me a host of different options... I could head west to the Netherlands or east to Poland. I would be only a few hours from the Czech Republic. I could travel by train or by bus. I could buy a car. I could even go on foot. There were dozens of border crossing points where I could pass myself off as a student and where they probably wouldn't even bother to check my ID. It was Hunter who had suggested it. There was no better place from which to disappear.

I was aware of all sorts of different feelings fighting inside me as we drove out through the shabby and depressing suburbs to the north of Paris. I still felt that I had let Hunter down, although he had assured me otherwise. He had been friendly but business-like when we met for breakfast that morning, keen to be on his way. He called me Yassen all the time, as if I had been stripped of my code name, but I was still using his. And that morning he had run by himself. Alone in my room, I had really missed our sprint around the city and felt excluded. It reminded me of the time when I'd broken my leg, when I was twelve, and had been forced out of a trip with the Young Pioneers.

I wondered if I would miss all this luxury: the five-star hotels, the international travel, buying clothes in high-class boutiques. It was very unlikely that I would be visiting Paris again and if I did, it certainly wouldn't have the pleasure and the excitement of the last week. I had thought that I was becoming something, turning into

something special. But now it was all over.

I had already begun to consider my future and had even come to a decision. There were still parts of my training that I could put to good use. I had learned languages. My English was excellent. The Countess had shown me how to hold my own with people much wealthier than me. And even Sharkovsky, in his own way, had been helpful. I knew how to iron shirts, polish shoes, make beds. The answer was obvious. I would find work in a hotel just like the George V. New hotels were being built all over Russia and I was certain I'd be able to get a job in one, starting as a bellboy or washing dishes in the kitchen and then working my way up. Moscow was too dangerous for me. It would have to be St Petersburg or somewhere further afield. But I would be able to support myself. I had no doubt of it.

I did not tell Hunter this. I would have been too ashamed. Anyway, we had already agreed that we would not discuss my plans. It was better for both of us if he didn't know.

I was not sorry. I was relieved.

From the moment I had met Julia Rothman in Venice, I had been drawn into something deadly and, deep down, I had worried that I had no place there. What would my parents have thought of me becoming a paid killer? It was true that they had not been entirely innocent themselves. They had worked in a factory that produced weapons of death. But they had been forced into it and in a sense they had spent their whole lives protecting me from having to do the same. They had fed the dream of my becoming a university student, a helicopter pilot ... whatever. Anything to get me out of Estrov. And what of Leo, a boy who had never hurt anyone in his life? He wouldn't have recognized the man I had almost become.

For better or for worse, it was over. That was what I told myself. I had a great deal of money with me. Only that morning I had drawn one hundred and fifty thousand euros from my bank account, knowing that when Scorpia discovered I had gone they would freeze the money. I had my freedom. However I looked at it, my situation was a lot better than it had been three and a half years ago. I shouldn't complain.

We arrived at the airport and checked in. As it happened, my flight was leaving just thirty minutes after Hunter's and we had a bit of time to kill. So we went through passport control and sat together in the departure lounge. We did not speak very much. Hunter was reading a paperback book. I had a magazine.

"I fancy a coffee," Hunter said, suddenly. "Can I get you one?"

"No. I'm all right, thanks."

He got up. "It may take a while. There's a bit of a queue. Will you keep an eye on my things?"

"Sure."

Despite all we had been through, we were like two strangers ... casual acquaintances at best.

He moved away, disappearing in the direction of the cafeteria. He hadn't checked in any luggage and was carrying two bags – a small suitcase and a canvas holdall. They were both on the floor and for no good reason I picked up the holdall and placed it on the empty seat next to me. As I did so, I noticed that one of the zips was partially undone. I went back to my magazine. Then I stopped. Something had caught my eye. What was it?

Moving the holdall had folded back the canvas, causing a side pocket to bulge open. Inside, there was a wallet, a mobile telephone, Hunter's boarding pass, a battery and a pair of sunglasses. It was the battery that had caught my attention. The brand was Power Plus. Where had I seen the name before and why did it mean something to me? I remembered. A few months ago, when I was on Malagosto, Gordon Ross had shown us all a number of gadgets supplied by the different intelligence services around the world. One of them had been a Power Plus battery that actually concealed a radio transmitter that agents could use to summon help.

But it was a British gadget, supplied by the British secret service. What was it doing in Hunter's bag?

I looked around me. There was no sign of Hunter. Quickly, I plucked the battery out and examined it, still hoping that it was perfectly ordinary and that I was making a mistake. I pressed the positive terminal, the little gold button on the top. Sure enough, there

was a spring underneath. Pushing it down released a mechanism inside, allowing the battery to separate into two connected parts. If I gave the whole thing a half-twist, I would instantly summon British intelligence to Terminal Two of Charles de Gaulle Airport.

British intelligence...

Horrible thoughts were already going through my mind. At the same time, something else occurred to me. Hunter had said he was going to get a coffee. Perhaps I was reading too much into it but he had left his wallet behind. How was he going to pay?

I got to my feet and moved away from the seats, ignoring the rows of waiting passengers, leaving the luggage behind. I felt light-headed, disconnected, as if I had been torn out of my own body. I turned a corner and saw the cafeteria. There wasn't a queue at all and Hunter certainly wasn't there. He'd lied to me. Where was he? I looked around and then I saw him. He was some distance away with his back partly turned to me but I wasn't mistaken. It was him. He was talking on the telephone ... an urgent, serious conversation. I might not be able to read his lips but I could tell that he didn't want to be overheard.

I went back to my seat, afraid that the luggage would be stolen if I didn't keep an eye on it – and how would I explain that? I was still holding the battery. I had almost forgotten it was in my hand. I unclicked the terminal and returned it to the holdall, then put the whole thing back on the floor. I didn't zip it up. Hunter would have spotted a detail like that. But I pressed the canvas with my foot so that the side pocket appeared closed. Then I opened my magazine.

But I didn't read it.

I knew. Without a shred of doubt. John Rider – Hunter – was a double agent, a spy sent in by MI6. Now that I thought about it, it was obvious and I should have seen it long ago. On that last night in Malagosto, when we had met in Sefton Nye's office, I had been quite certain he hadn't followed me in and I had been right. He had arrived *before* me. He had been there all along. Nye hadn't left his door open. Hunter must have unlocked it moments before I arrived. He had gone in there for exactly the same reason as me ... to get access to Nye's

files. But in his case, he had been searching for information about Scorpia to pass on to his bosses. No wonder he had been so keen to get me out of there. He hadn't reported me to Nye ... not because he was protecting me but because he didn't want anyone asking questions about him.

Now I understood why he hadn't killed the young policeman at Vosque's flat. A real assassin wouldn't have thought twice about it but a British agent couldn't possibly behave the same way. He had shot the Commander. There was no doubt about that. But Gabriel Sweetman had been a monster, a major drug trafficker, and the British and American governments would have been delighted to see him executed. What of Vosque himself? He was a senior French officer, no matter what his failings. And it suddenly occurred to me that I only had Hunter's word for it that he was dead. I hadn't actually been in the room when the shot was fired. Right now, Vosque could be anywhere. In jail, out of the country ... but alive!

At the same time I saw, with icy clarity, that John Rider had been sent to do more than spy on Scorpia. He had also been sent to sabotage them. He had been deceiving me from the very start. On the one hand he had been pretending to teach me. I couldn't deny that I had learned from him. But all the time he had been undermining my confidence. In the jungle, everything he had told me about himself was untrue. He hadn't killed a man in a pub. He hadn't been in jail. He had used the story to gain my sympathy and then he had twisted it against me, telling me that I wasn't cut out to be like him. It was John Rider who had planted the idea that I should run away.

He had done the same thing in Paris. The way he had suddenly turned on me when we were in Vosque's flat, asking me to do something that nobody in their right mind would ever do whether they were being paid or not. He had given me that hideous little knife. And he had called Vosque by his real name. Not "the victim". Not "the Cop". He had wanted me to think about what I was doing so that I wouldn't be able to do it. And the result? All the training Scorpia had given me would have been wasted. They would have lost their newest recruit.

Of course Scorpia would track me down. Of course they would have killed me. John Rider had tried to convince me otherwise but he was probably on the phone to them even now, warning them I was about to abscond. Why would he risk leaving me alive? Scorpia would have someone waiting for me at Berlin airport. After all, Berlin had been his idea. A taxi would pull up. I would get in. And I would never be seen again.

I was barely breathing. My hands were gripping the magazine so tightly that I was almost tearing it in half. What hurt most, what filled me with a black, unrelenting hatred, was the knowledge that it had all been fake. It had all been lies. After everything I had been through, the loss of everyone I loved, my daily humiliation at the hands of Vladimir Sharkovsky, the poverty, the hopelessness, I thought I had finally found a friend. I had trusted John Rider and I would have done anything for him. But in a way he was worse than any of them. I was nothing to him. He had secretly been laughing at me – all the time.

I looked up. He was walking towards me.

“Everything OK?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “You didn’t get your coffee?”

“The queue was too long. Anyway, they’ve just called my flight.”

I glanced at the screen. That, at least, was true. The flight to Rome was blinking.

“Well, it looks as if it’s goodbye, Yassen. I wish you luck ... wherever you decide to go.”

“Thank you, Hunter. I’ll never forget you.”

We shook hands. My face gave nothing away.

He picked up his cases and I watched him join the queue and board the flight. He didn’t turn round again. As soon as he had gone, I took my own case and left the airport. I didn’t fly to Berlin. Any flight with the passengers’ names listed on a computer screen would be too dangerous for me. I took the train back into Paris and joined a group of students and backpackers on a Magic Bus to Hamburg. From there, I caught a train to Hanover with a connection to Moscow. It was a journey that would take me thirty-six hours but that didn’t bother me.

I knew exactly what I had to do.

УБИЙЦА

THE ASSASSIN

I had not seen the *dacha* at Silver Forest for a very long time. I had thought I would never see it again.

It had been strange to find myself back at Kazansky Station in Moscow. I remembered stepping off the train in my Young Pioneers uniform. It seemed like a lifetime ago. There was no sign of Dima, Roman or Grigory, which was probably just as well. I have no idea what I would have said to them if I had seen them. On the one hand, I would have liked them to know that I was safe and well. But perhaps it was best that we did not renew our acquaintance. My world was very different now.

It seemed to me that there were now fewer homeless children than there had been in the square outside the station. Perhaps the new government was finally getting its act together and looking after them. It is possible, I suppose, that they were all in jail. The food stalls had gone too. I thought of the raspberry ice cream I had devoured. Had it really been me that day? Or had it been Yasha Gregorovich, a boy who had disappeared and who would never be spoken about again?

I travelled on the Metro to Shchukinskaya Station and from there I took a trolleybus to the park. After that, I walked. It was strange that I had never actually seen the *dacha* from outside. I had arrived in the boot of a car. I had left, in the darkness, in a helicopter. But I knew exactly where I was going. All the papers relating to the planning and construction of Sharkovsky's home, along with the necessary licences and permits, had been lodged, as I suspected, with the Moscow Architecture and City Planning Committee. I had visited their offices in Triumfalnaya Square – curiously they were very close to Dima's place off Tverskaya Street – very early in the morning. Breaking in had presented no problem. They were not expecting thieves.

Now I understood why Sharkovsky had chosen to live here. The landscape – flat and green with its pine forests, lakes and beaches – was very beautiful. I saw a few riders on horseback. It was hard to believe that I had been so close to the city during my three years at the *dacha*. But here the noise of the traffic was replaced by soft breezes and birdsong. There were no tall buildings breaking the skyline.

A narrow private road led to the *dacha*. I followed it for a while, then slipped behind the trees that grew on either side. It was unlikely that Sharkovsky had planted sensors underneath the concrete and there was no sign of any cameras, but I could not be sure. Eventually, the outer wall came into sight. I recognized the shape of it, the razor wire and the brickwork even from the outside.

It was not going to be difficult to break in. Sharkovsky prided himself on his security network but I had been trained by experts. His men went through the same procedures, day in and day out. They acted mechanically, without thinking. And how many times had it been drummed into me on Malagosto? Habit is a weakness. It is what gets you killed. Certain cars and delivery trucks always arrived at the *dacha* at a given time. I remembered noting them down in my former life, scribbling in the back of an exercise book. Madness! It was a gift to the enemy.

The laundry van arrived shortly after five o'clock, by which time it was already dark. I knew it would come. I had lost count of the number of times I had helped to empty it, carrying dirty sheets out and fresh linen in. As the driver approached the main gate, he saw a branch that seemed to have fallen from a tree, blocking the way. He stopped the van, got out and moved it. When he got back in again, he was unaware that he had an extra passenger. The back door hadn't been locked. Why should it have been? It was only carrying sheets and towels.

The van reached the barrier and stopped. Again, I knew exactly what would happen. I had seen it often enough and it was imprinted in my mind. There were three guards inside the security hut. One of them was meant to be monitoring the TV cameras but he was old and

lazy and was more likely to have his head buried in a newspaper. The second man would stay on the left-hand side of the van to check the driver's ID, while the third searched underneath the vehicle, using a flat mirror on wheels. I timed the moment exactly, then slipped out of the back and hid on the left-hand side, right next to the security hut, lost in the shadows. Now the first guard opened the back and checked inside. He was too late. I had gone. I heard him rummaging around inside. Eventually, he emerged.

"All right," he called out. "You can move on."

It was very kind of him to let me know when it was safe. I dodged round, still shielded by the van, and climbed back inside. The driver started the van and we rolled forward, on our way to the house.

It was a simple matter to slip out again once we had stopped. I knew where we would be, next to the side door that all the servants and delivery people used. I was careful not to step on the grass. I remembered where the sensors were positioned. I was also careful to avoid the CCTV cameras as I edged forward. Even so, I was astonished to find that the door was not locked. Sharkovsky was a fool! I would have advised him to rethink all his security arrangements after a paid assassin had made it into the house – and certainly after Arkady Zelin and I had escaped with him. That made three people who knew his weaknesses. But then again, he had been in hospital for a very long time. His mind had been on other things.

I found myself inside, back in those familiar corridors. The laundry man had gone ahead and the housekeeper had gone with him. I passed the kitchen. Pavel was still there. The chef was bending over the stove, putting the finishing touches to the pie that he was planning to serve that evening. I knew I didn't have to worry about him. He was slightly deaf and absorbed in his work. However, there was something I needed. I reached out and unhooked the key to Sharkovsky's Lexus. Had I been in charge here, I would have suggested that all the keys should themselves be kept locked up somewhere more safe. But that was not my concern. It seemed only right that the car that had first brought me here would also provide my means of escape. It was bulletproof. I would be able to smash

through the barrier and nobody would be able to stop me.

How easy it all was – and it had been in front of me all the time! But of course, I had been seeing things with very different eyes back then. I was a village boy. I had never heard of Scorpia. I knew nothing.

I continued forward, knowing that I would have to be more careful from this point on. Things must have changed inside the house. For a start, the two bodyguards – Josef and Karl – would have been replaced, one of them buried and the other fired. Sharkovsky might have a new, more efficient team around him. But the hall was silent. Everything was as I remembered it, right down to the flower display on the central table. I tiptoed across and slipped through the door that led down to the basement. This was where I would wait until dinner had been served, in the same room where I had been shown the body of the dead food taster.

I did not climb upstairs again until eleven o'clock, by which time I imagined everyone would be in bed. I had been able to make out some of the sounds coming from above and it was clear to me that there had been no formal dinner party that night. The lights were out. There was nobody in sight. I went straight into Sharkovsky's study. I was concerned that the Dalmatian might be there but thought it would remember me and probably wouldn't bark. In fact, there was no sign of it. Perhaps Sharkovsky had got rid of it. There was a fire burning low in the hearth and the glow guided me across the room as I approached the desk. I was looking for something and found it in the bottom drawer. Now all that remained was to climb upstairs to the bedroom at the end of the corridor where Sharkovsky slept.

But as it turned out, it was not necessary. To my surprise, the door opened and the lights in the room were turned on. It was Sharkovsky, on his own. He did not see me. I was hidden behind the desk but I watched as he closed the door and, with difficulty, manoeuvred himself into the room.

He was no longer walking. He was in a wheelchair, dressed in a silk dressing gown and pyjamas. Either he was now sleeping downstairs or he had built himself a lift. He was more gaunt than I remembered.

His head was still shaved, his eyes dark and vengeful but now they seemed to sparkle with the memory of pain. His mouth was twisted downwards in a permanent grimace and his skin was grey, stretched over the bones of his face. Even the colours of his tattoo seemed to have faded. I could just make out the eagle's wings on his chest beneath his pyjama top. Every movement was difficult for him. I guessed that he had indeed broken his neck when he had fallen. And although the bullets had not killed him, they had done catastrophic harm, leaving him a wreck.

The door was shut. We were alone. I had quickly taken out a pair of wire cutters and used them but now I stood up, revealing myself. I was holding the gun, the revolver that he had handed to me the first time I had come to this room. In my other hand, there was a box of bullets.

"Yassen Gregorovich!" he exclaimed. His voice was very weak as if something inside his throat had been severed. His face showed only shock. Even though I was holding a gun, he did not think himself to be in any danger. "I didn't expect to see you again." He sneered at me. "Have you come back for your old job?"

"No," I said. "That's not why I'm here."

He wheeled himself forward, heading for his side of the desk. I moved away, making room for him. It was right that it should be this way ... as it had been all those years before.

"What happened to Arkady Zelin?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied.

"They were in it together, weren't they? He and the mechanic." I didn't say anything so he went on. "I will find them eventually. I have people looking for them all over the world. They've been looking for you, too." He was rasping and his voice was thick with hatred. He didn't need to tell me what they would have done with me if they'd found me. "Did you help them?" he asked. "Were you part of the plot?"

"No."

"But you left with them."

"I persuaded them to take me."

“So why have you come back?”

“We have unfinished business. We have to talk about Estrov.”

“Estrov?” The name took him by surprise.

“I used to live there.”

“But you said...” He thought back and somehow he remembered.

“You said you came from Kirsk.”

“My parents, all my friends died. You were responsible.”

He smiled. It was a horrible, death’s-head smile with more malevolence in it than I would have thought possible. “Well, well, well,” he croaked. “I have to say, I’m surprised. And you came here for revenge? That’s not very civil of you, Yassen. I looked after you. I took you into my house. I fed you and gave you a job. Where’s your gratitude?”

He had been fiddling around as he spoke, reaching for something underneath the desk. But I had already found what he was looking for.

“I’ve disconnected the alarm button,” I told him. “If you’re calling for help, it won’t come.”

For the first time, he looked uncertain. “What do you want?” he hissed.

“Not revenge,” I said. “Completion. We have to finish the business that started here.”

I placed the gun on the desk in front of him and spilt out the bullets.

“When you brought me here, you made me play a game,” I said. “It was a horrible, vicious thing to do. I was fourteen years old! I cannot think of any other human being who would do that to a child. Well, now we are going to play it again – but this time according to my rules.”

Sharkovsky could only watch, fascinated, as I picked up the gun, flicked open the cylinder and placed a bullet inside. I paused, then followed it with a second bullet, a third, a fourth and a fifth. Only then did I shut it. I spun the cylinder.

Five bullets. One empty chamber.

The exact reverse of the odds that Sharkovsky had offered me.

He had worked it out for himself. "Russian roulette? You think I'm going to play?" he snarled. "I'm not going to commit suicide in front of you, Yassen Gregorovich. You can kill me if you want to, but otherwise you can go to hell."

"That's exactly where you kept me," I said. I was holding the gun, remembering the feel of it. I could even remember its taste. "I blame you for everything that has happened to me, Vladimir Sharkovsky. If it wasn't for you, I would still be in my village with my family and friends. But from the moment you came into my life, I was sent on a journey. I was given a destiny which I was unable to avoid."

"I do not want to be a killer. And this is my last chance ... my last chance to avoid exactly that." I felt something hot, trickling down the side of my face. A tear. I did not want to show weakness in front of him. I did not wipe it away. "Do you understand what I am saying to you? What you want, what Scorpia wants, what everyone wants ... it is not what I want."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sharkovsky said. "I'm tired and I've had enough of this. I'm going to bed."

"I didn't come here to kill you," I said. "I came here to die."

I raised the gun. Five bullets. One empty chamber.

I pressed it against my head.

Sharkovsky stared at me.

I pulled the trigger.

The click was as loud as an explosion would have been. Against all the odds, I was still alive. And yet, I had expected it. I had been chosen. My future lay ahead of me and there was to be no escape.

"You're mad!" Sharkovsky whispered.

"I am what you made me," I said.

I swung the gun round and shot him between the eyes. The wheelchair was propelled backwards, crashing into the wall. Blood splattered onto the desk. His hands jerked uselessly, then went limp.

I heard footsteps in the hallway outside and a moment later the door crashed open. I had expected to see the new bodyguards but it was Ivan Sharkovsky who stood there, wearing a dinner jacket with a black tie hanging loose around his neck. He saw his father. Then he

saw me.

“Yassen!” he exclaimed in the voice I knew so well.

I shot him three times. Once in the head, twice in the heart.

Then I left.

EPILOGUE

THE KILL

King's Cross, London. Three o'clock in the morning.

The station was closed and silent. The streets were almost empty. A few shops were still open – a kebab restaurant and a minicab office, their plastic signs garishly bright. But there were no customers.

Inside his hotel room, Yassen Gregorovich took out the memory stick and turned off the computer. He had read enough. He was still sitting at the desk. The tray with the dirty dishes from his supper was on the carpet beside him. He looked at the blank screen, then yawned. He needed to sleep. He stripped off his clothes and left them, folded, on a chair. Then he showered, dried himself and went to bed. He was asleep almost immediately. He did not dream. Since that final night in the Silver Forest, he never dreamed.

He woke again at exactly seven o'clock. It was a Saturday and the street was quieter than it had been the day before. The sun was shining but he could see from the flag on the building opposite that there was a certain amount of wind. He quickly scanned the pavements looking for anything out of place, anyone who shouldn't be there. Everything seemed normal. He showered again, then shaved and got dressed. The computer was where he had left it on the table and he powered it up so that he could check for any new messages. He knew that the order he had received the day before would still be active. Scorpia were not in the habit of changing their minds. The screen told him that he had received a single email and he opened it. As usual, it had been encrypted and sent to an account that could not be traced to him. He read it, considering its contents. He planned the day ahead.

He went downstairs and had breakfast – tea, yoghurt, fresh fruit. There was a gym at the hotel but it was too small and ill-equipped to be worth using, and anyway, he wouldn't have felt safe in the confined space, down in the basement. It was almost as bad as the lift. After breakfast, he returned to his room, checking the door handle one last time, packed the few items he had brought with him

and left.

“Goodbye, Mr Reddy. I hope you enjoyed your stay.”

“Thank you.”

The girl at the checkout desk was Romanian, quite attractive. Yassen had no girlfriend, of course. Any such relationship was out of the question but for a brief moment he felt a twinge of regret. He thought of Colette, the girl who had died in Argentina. At once, he was annoyed with himself. He shouldn't have spent so much time reading the diary.

He paid the bill using a credit card connected to the same gymnasium where he supposedly worked. He took the receipt but later on he would burn it. A receipt was the beginning of a paper trail. It was the last thing he needed.

As he left the hotel, he noticed a man reading a newspaper. The headlines screamed out at him:

**SHOOTING AT SCIENCE MUSEUM
PRIME MINISTER INVOLVED
“NO ONE HURT,” SAYS MI6**

It was interesting that there was no mention of either Herod Sayle or Alex Rider. Nobody would want to suggest that a billionaire and major benefactor in the UK had been involved in an assassination attempt. As for Alex Rider, the secret service would have kept him well away from the press. They had recruited a fourteen-year-old schoolboy. That was one story that would never see the light of day.

Yassen passed through the revolving doors and walked round to the car park. He had hired a car, a Renault Clio, charging it to the same company as the hotel room. He put his things in the boot, then drove west, all the way across London and over to a street in Chelsea, not far from the river. He parked close to a handsome terraced house with ivy growing up the wall, a small, square garden at the front and a wrought-iron gate.

So this was where Alex Rider lived. Yassen assumed he would be somewhere inside, perhaps still asleep. There would be no school today, of course, but even if there had been it was unlikely that Alex would have attended. Only the day before, he had hijacked a cargo plane in Cornwall and forced the pilot to fly him to London. He had parachuted into the Science Museum in South Kensington and shot Herod Sayle, wounding him seconds before he could press the button that would activate the Stormbreaker computers. There had been a furore. Just as the newspapers had reported, the Prime Minister had been present. The police, the SAS and MI6 had been involved. Yassen tried to imagine the scene. It must have been chaos.

He sat behind the wheel, still watching the house.

Yes. Alex Rider most certainly deserved a few extra hours in bed.

About an hour later, the front door opened and a young woman came out. She was wearing jeans and a loose-fitting jersey with red

hair tumbling down to her shoulders. Yassen had never met her but he knew who she was: Jack Starbright, Alex's housekeeper. It must have been rather odd the two of them living together but there was no one else. John Rider had died a long time ago. There had been an uncle, Ian Rider, who had become Alex's guardian, but he was dead too. Yassen knew because he had been personally responsible for that killing. How had he become so tangled up with this family? Would they never leave him alone?

Jack Starbright was carrying a straw bag. She was going shopping. While she was away, Yassen could slip into the house and tiptoe upstairs. If Alex Rider was in bed asleep, it would all be over very quickly. It would be easier for him that way. He simply wouldn't wake up.

But Yassen had already decided against it. There were too many uncertainties. He hadn't yet checked out the layout of the house. He didn't know if there were alarms. The housekeeper could return at any moment. At the same time, he thought about the email that he had received. It presented him with a new priority. The Stormbreaker business wasn't quite over. Dealing with Alex Rider now might compromise what lay ahead. He reached down and turned the engine back on. It was useful to know where Alex lived, to acquaint himself with the territory. He could return at another time.

He drove off.

Yassen spent the rest of the day doing very little. It was one of the stranger aspects of his work. He'd had to learn how to fill long gaps of inactivity, effectively how to kill time. He had often found himself waiting in hotel rooms for days or even weeks. The secret was to put yourself in neutral gear, to keep yourself alert but without wasting physical or mental energy. There were meditation techniques that he had been taught when he was on Malagosto. He used them now.

Later that afternoon, he drove into the Battersea Heliport, situated between Battersea and Wandsworth bridges. It is the only place in London where businessmen can arrive or leave by helicopter. The machine that he had ordered was waiting for him – a red and yellow Colibri EC-120B, which he liked because it was so remarkably silent.

He had received his helicopter pilot's licence five years ago, finally realizing a dream which he had had as a child, although he had never, after all, worked in air-sea rescue. It was just another skill that was useful for his line of work. He kept moving. He kept adapting. That was how he survived.

He had telephoned ahead. The helicopter was fuelled and ready. All the necessary clearances had been arranged. Taking his case with him, Yassen climbed into the cockpit and a few minutes later he was airborne, following the River Thames east towards the City. The email that he had received had specified a time and a place. He saw that place ahead of him, an office building thirty storeys high with a flat roof and a radio mast. There was a cross, painted bright red, signalling where he should land.

Herod Sayle was there, waiting for him.

It was Sayle who had sent him the email that morning and who had arranged all this, paying an extra one million euros into the special account that Yassen had in Geneva. The police were looking for the billionaire all over Britain. The airports and main railway stations were being watched. There were extra policemen all around the coast. Sayle had paid Yassen to fly him out of the country. They would land outside Paris, where a private jet was waiting for him. From there he would be flown to a hideout in South America.

Hovering in the air, still some distance away, Yassen recognized Sayle ... even though the man was dressed almost comically in an ill-fitting cardigan and corduroy trousers, very different from the suits he usually favoured, and presumably some sort of disguise. But the dark skin, the bald head and the smallness of his stature were unmistakable. Sayle liked to wear a gold signet ring and there it was, flashing in the afternoon sun. He was holding a gun. And he was not alone. Yassen's eyes narrowed. There was a boy standing opposite him, close to the edge of the roof. It was Alex Rider! The gun was being aimed at him. Sayle was talking and it was obvious to Yassen that he was about to fire. He had somehow managed to capture the boy and had brought him here – to kill him before he left. Yassen wondered how Alex had allowed himself to fall into Sayle's hands.

He came to a decision. It wasn't easy, sliding open the cockpit door, reaching into his case and keeping control of the Colibri, all at same time – but he managed it. He took out the gun he had brought with him. It was a Glock long-range shooting pistol, accurate at up to two hundred metres. In fact, Yassen was much nearer than that, which was just as well. This wasn't going to be easy.

It was time to make the kill.

He aimed carefully, the gun in one hand, the cyclic rod in the other. The helicopter was steady, hanging in the air. He gently squeezed the trigger and fired twice. Even before the bullets had reached their target, he knew he hadn't missed.

Herod Sayle twisted and fell. He hit the ground and lay quite still, unaware of the pool of blood spreading around him.

The boy didn't move. Yassen admired him for that. If Alex had tried to run, he would have received a bullet in the back before he had taken two paces. Much better to talk. The two of them had unfinished business.

Yassen landed the helicopter as quickly as he could, never once taking his eyes off Alex. The gun that had just killed Sayle was still resting in his lap. The landing skid touched the roof of the building and settled. Yassen switched off the engine and got out.

The two of them stood face to face.

It was extraordinary how similar he was to his father. Alex's hair was longer and it was lighter in colour, reminding Yassen of the woman he had glimpsed with John Rider at Sacré-Cœur. He had the same brown eyes and there was something about the way he stood with exactly the same composure and self-confidence. He had just seen a man die but he wasn't afraid. It seemed remarkable – and strangely appropriate – that he was only fourteen, the same age that Yassen had been when those other helicopters had come to his village.

Alex's parents were dead, just like his. They had been killed by a bomb, planted in an aeroplane on the orders of Scorpia. Yassen was glad that he'd had nothing to do with it. He had never told Julia Rothman what he knew about John Rider. By the time he returned to

Venice, Hunter had already left, travelling with one of the other recruits. What was the point of sentencing him to death? Yassen had already decided. Whoever he might be and whatever he might have done, there could be no denying that Hunter had saved his life in the Peruvian rainforest and that had created a debt of honour. Yassen would simply blot out the knowledge in his mind. He would pretend he hadn't seen the Power Plus battery, that it had never happened. And what if Rider caused more damage to Scorpia? It didn't matter. Yassen owed no loyalty to them or to anyone else. In this new life of his, he would owe loyalty to no one.

He would still have his revenge. John Rider had betrayed him and in return, Yassen would become the most efficient, the most cold-blooded assassin in the world. Vladimir and Ivan Sharkovsky had been just the start. Since then, there had been ... how many of them? A hundred? Almost certainly more. And every time Yassen had walked away from another victim, he had proved that John Rider was wrong. He had become exactly what he was meant to be.

And here was John Rider's son. It was somehow inevitable that the two of them should finally meet. How much did Alex know about the past, Yassen wondered. Did he have any idea what his father had been?

"You're Yassen Gregorovich," Alex said.

Yassen nodded.

"Why did you kill him?" Alex glanced at the body of Herod Sayle.

"Those were my instructions," Yassen replied, but in fact he was lying. Scorpia had not ordered him to kill Sayle. He had made an instant decision, acting on his own initiative. He knew, however, that they would be pleased. Sayle had become an embarrassment. He had failed. It was better that he was dealt with once and for all.

"What about me?" Alex asked.

Yassen paused before replying. "I have no instructions concerning you."

It was another lie. The message on his computer could not have been clearer. But Yassen knew that he could not kill Alex Rider. The bond of honour that had once existed with the father extended to the

son. Very briefly, he thought back to Paris. It was hard to explain but there was a sort of parallel. He saw it now and it was why, at the last minute, he had diverted his aim. How he had been to John Rider when the two of them were together, in some way Alex Rider was to him now. There would be no more killing today.

“You killed Ian Rider,” Alex said. “He was my uncle.”

Ian Rider. John Rider’s younger brother. It was true – Yassen had shot him as he had tried to escape from Herod Sayle’s compound in Cornwall. That was how this had all begun. It was the reason Alex Rider was here.

Yassen shrugged. “I kill a lot of people.”

“One day I’ll kill you.”

“A lot of people have tried,” Yassen said. “Believe me, it would be better if we didn’t meet again. Go back to school. Go back to your life. And the next time they ask you, say no. Killing is for grown-ups and you’re still a child.”

It was the same advice that Alex’s father had once given him. But Yassen was offering it for a very different reason.

The two of them had come from different worlds but they had so much in common. At the same age, they had lost everything that mattered to them. They had found themselves alone. And they had both been chosen. In Alex’s case it had been the British secret service, MI6 Special Operations, who had come calling. For Yassen it had been Scorpia. Had either of them ever had any choice?

It might still not be too late. Yassen thought about his life, the diary he had read the night before. If only someone could have reached out and taken hold of him ... before he got on the train to Moscow, before he broke into the flat near Gorky Park, before he reached Malagosto. For him, there had been nobody. But for Alex Rider, it didn’t need to be the same.

He had given Alex a chance.

It was enough. There was nothing more to say. Yassen turned round and walked back to the helicopter. Alex didn’t move. Yassen flicked on the engine, waited until the blades had reached full velocity and took off a second time. At the last moment, he raised a hand in a

gesture of farewell. Alex did the same.

The two of them looked at each other, both of them trapped in different ways, on opposite sides of the glass.

Finally Yassen pulled at the controls and the helicopter lifted off the ground. He would have to report to Scorpia, explain to them why he had done what he had done. Would they kill him because of it? Yassen didn't think so. He was too valuable to them. They would already have another name in another envelope waiting for him. Someone whose turn had come to die.

He couldn't stop himself. High above the Thames with the sun setting over the water, he spun the cockpit round and glanced back one last time. But now the roof was empty apart from the body stretched out beside the red cross.

Alex Rider had gone.

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A great many of the details in this book are therefore based on fact but it's fair to say that the overall picture may not be entirely accurate. So much changed between 1995 and 2000 – the approximate setting for the story – that I've been forced to use a certain amount of dramatic licence.

My assistant Olivia Zampi organized everything right up to the photocopying and binding. I owe a very special debt of thanks to my son Cassian, who was the first to read the manuscript and who made some enormously helpful criticisms, and to both Sarah Handley at Walker Books and Harry F at HMP Ashfield who both suggested the title. I am, as ever, grateful to Jane Winterbotham, my squeamish but incisive editor at Walker Books. Finally, my wife – Jill Green – lived

through the writing of this without hiring a contract killer to have me eliminated. She must have been tempted.



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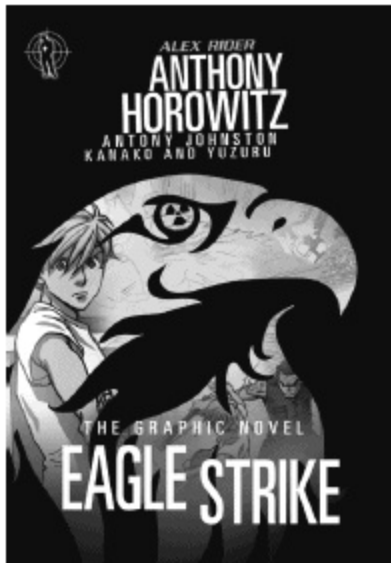
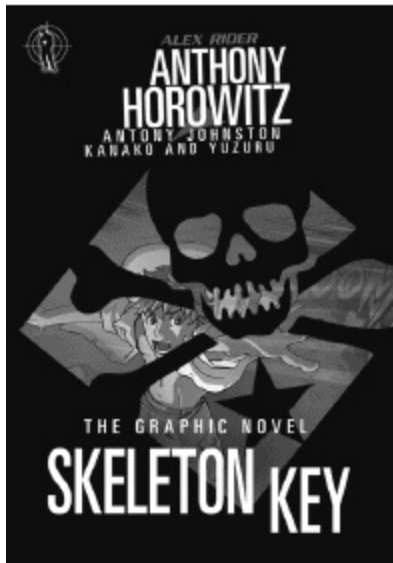
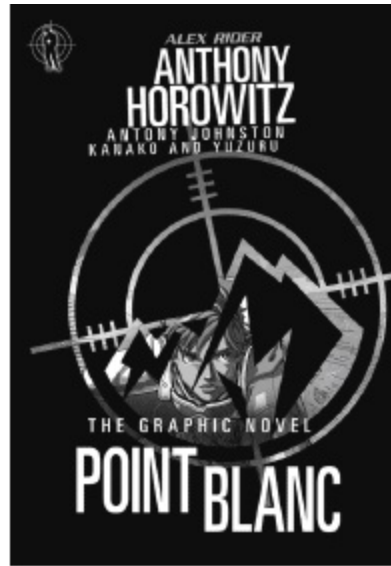
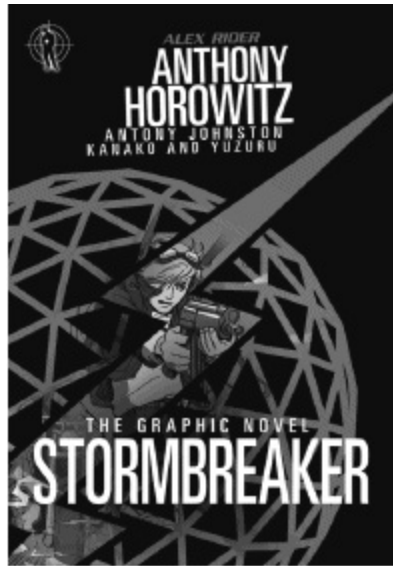


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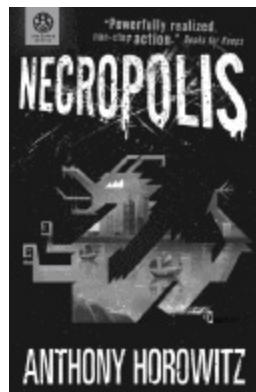


BOOK THREE

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BOOK FOUR

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Five have the power to defeat it.

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BOOK FIVE

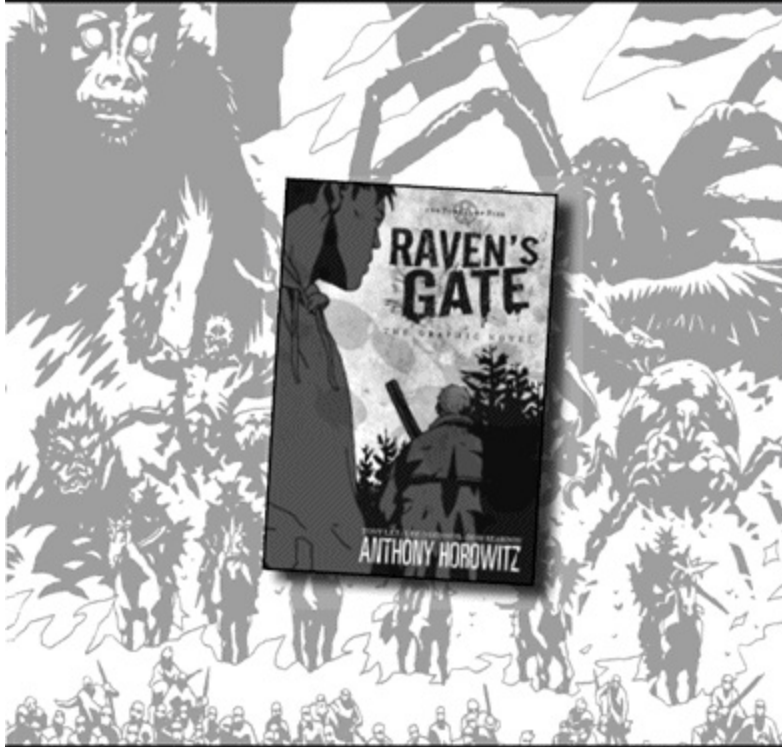
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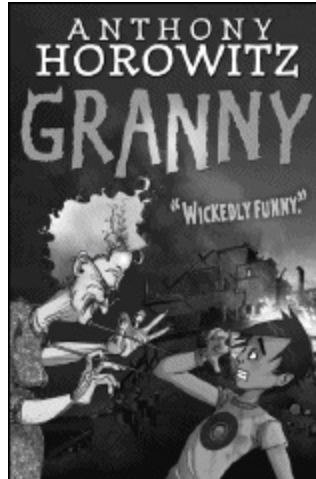
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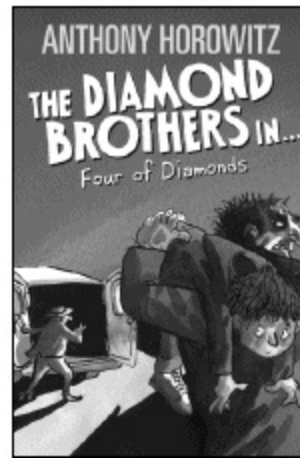
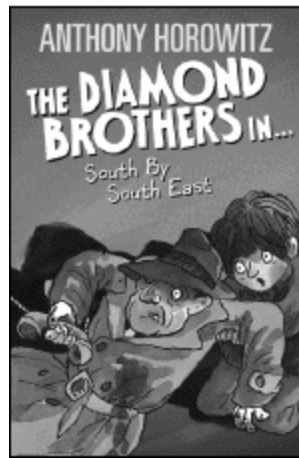
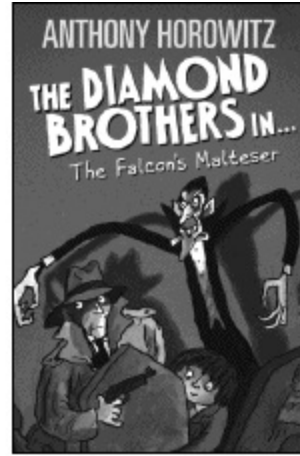
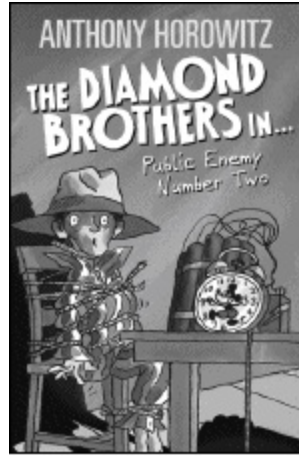
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